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THE BALLOON GAVE A LITTLE JERK AND SWAYED FROM SIDE TO SIDE—
Page 160

THE DAREWELL CHUMS

Or

The Heroes of the School

BY

ALLEN CHAPMAN

AUTHOR OF "THE DAREWELL CHUMS IN THE CITY," "THE
DAREWELL CHUMS IN THE WOODS," "THE YOUNG EX-
PRESS AGENT," "TWO BOY PUBLISHERS,"
"MAIL ORDER FRANK," ETC.

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BOOKS BY ALLEN CHAPMAN

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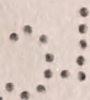
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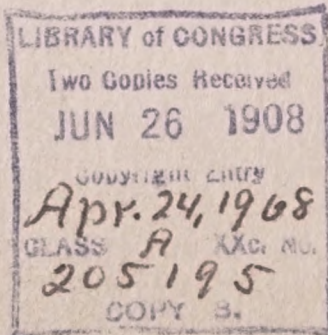
Or A Smart Boy and His Chances

A BUSINESS BOY

Or Winning Success


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THE DAREWELL CHUMS



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PREFACE

My Dear Boys:

In presenting to you this first volume of the "Darewell Chums Series," I want first to express the hope that you will have as much pleasure in making the acquaintance of the chums as I have had in writing about them. That they are fine boys any one who knows them will admit, and I have been permitted a close companionship with them for some time. They are lads brimful of fun, just as you all are, and, perhaps, they have just the least bit of mischief in their makeup, as, indeed, what real boy has not?

In this and the succeeding volumes you will find set down the doings of Ned Wilding, Bart Keene, "Stumpy" Masterson and Frank Roscoe. They are boys each with an individual characteristic. They have many adventures, not only in their home town of Darewell, but also in other places. In this particular book they take part in solving a mystery which, for a time baffles them not a little.

PREFACE

But the boys are not the only ones who have parts to perform in this and the other dramas I hope to write for you. There is Bart's sister, Alice, who asks nothing better than to bind up a finger broken in catching "a hot one" off the bat, for she is going to be a trained nurse. And there is Jennie Smith, who has a leaning toward the life of an actress, and there are other girls and other boys who, with the "Darewell Chums" take part in lively scenes and adventures.

But there, I will not detain you any longer telling you what I hope and what I am going to do. You may start right in with the story now, and that you will be pleased with it is the sincere wish of

Your friend,

ALLEN CHAPMAN.

THE DAREWELL CHUMS

CHAPTER I

EXPELLING A PUPIL

“WHAT are you looking so glum about this morning, Stumpy?” asked Ned Wilding as he greeted his chum, Fenn Masterson, otherwise known as “Stumpy” because of his short, stout figure. “Haven’t you got your lessons, or are you going to be expelled?”

“I’m not to be expelled but some one else is, Ned.”

“What’s that? Some one going to be expelled?” asked Bart Keene, coming up in time to hear what Fenn said.

“John Newton is,” replied Stumpy.

“What’s that got to do with you?” asked Bart, for, as had Ned, he noticed that Fenn looked worried.

“It might have something to do with me if John —”

Just then the bell of the Darewell High School began to ring, and, as it was the final summons to classes the three boys and several other pupils hurried into the building. On the way up the stairs Ned Wilding was joined by a tall youth with dark hair and eyes.

“What’s this I hear about John Newton?” asked the tall lad.

“Hello, Frank! Why Stumpy says John’s got to leave the school, but it’s the first I heard about it.”

“Are they going to expel him this morning?”

“Seems so. We’ll soon know.”

A little later several hundred boys and girls were gathered in the auditorium of the school for the usual morning exercises. When they were over the principal, Professor McCloud, came to the edge of the platform.

“I have a very unpleasant duty to perform,” he began.

Most of the boys and girls knew what was coming. The principal never prefaced his remarks that way unless he had to expel a pupil. Ned and Bart looked over toward where Fenn sat. They wanted to see if there was any reason for Stumpy’s seeming apprehension.

“John Newton!” called Professor McCloud,

and a tall youth, with eyes that squinted slightly, left his seat and shambled forward.

“It’s coming now,” whispered Fenn, and Frank Roscoe, who was sitting beside him, looked at his chum and wondered.

“Any one would think it was you who had to face the music,” declared Frank.

By this time John Newton was standing in front of the raised platform on which the principal and teachers sat during the morning exercises. He did not seem to mind the humility or disgrace of his position. He turned half around and looked toward Fenn.

“If he says anything —” began Stumpy, whispering to himself, but he did not finish the sentence for Professor McCloud was speaking.

“John Newton,” the principal said, “I am deeply grieved that I have to do this. It is very painful.” It was the same speech the pupils had heard before. The principal always used it, with such slight variations as might be necessary. “You have been dilatory in your studies. You have been insubordinate. You have played mean tricks. You have refused to mend your ways.”

The principal took a long breath. He always did at this particular point in his painful duty. But this time there was a variation from the usual

scene. John Newton stepped forward and addressed the principal. It was a thing unheard of in the Darewell school.

“Professor McCloud,” said John, “I want to say that while I’m partly to blame in this matter, Fenn Mas —”

“That will do! That will do!” interrupted Mr. McCloud so sharply that John started. A number of the pupils turned in their seats to gaze at Stumpy, who looked painfully self-conscious.

“There’s something in the wind,” whispered Ned to Bart.

“I’m not going to take all the blame,” persisted John, ignoring the principal’s command to remain silent. “Fenn Mast —”

“I said that would do,” and Mr. McCloud spoke so decisively that John remained silent. “I know what you would say,” the professor went on. “I have looked into that matter thoroughly. No one is to blame but yourself, and your effort to shift the punishment to some other boy does not do you any good. You should not have attempted to mention any pupil’s name. I will not refer to it again, except to say that no one is involved but yourself. I am fully satisfied on this point.”

Frank noticed that Fenn seemed much relieved

at the professor's announcement, and he wondered what connection there could have been between his chum and John Newton.

"You have been given several opportunities to reform," the principal went on, "but you have refused to profit by them. You are a dangerous element to have in this school. Therefore, we return you to your friends," and, with a wave of his glasses toward the door to emphasize his remark, the principal indicated that John Newton might go. That ended it. John was expelled.

The pupils went to their various classes, and, though there was considerable whispering back and forth during the morning session as to what caused John's expulsion, and what his reference to Fenn might mean, there was no chance to discuss the matter until the noon recess. Then questions and answers flew thick and fast.

"Now Fenn, tell us all about it," said Ned Wilding when he and the two other boys who had remarked Stumpy's apprehension, were gathered in the basement where lunches were usually eaten. "What was John driving at? What were you afraid of?"

"Didn't you hear Professor McCloud say it was all ended and he was satisfied I had no hand in it?"

“Yes, but that doesn’t satisfy us,” said Bart.
“We want the whole story.”

“There isn’t much to it,” Fenn declared.
“You must promise not to repeat it.”

“We’ll promise but I guess John will tell it all over town,” said Frank.

“You know John and I used to be pretty friendly,” Fenn began, getting his chums off into a corner. “He lives near me and I used to go fishing with him once in a while. But he got down on me because I wouldn’t lend him my best reel one day, though for a while I didn’t know he wasn’t friendly.

“He’s always playing some kind of tricks in school, but most of ’em aren’t any worse than those we get up. But this last one was the limit.”

“What was it?” asked Ned.

“He’d been reading some book on India, and how they catch tigers by smearing bird-lime on the leaves near the water-hole. He made some of the lime. I helped him. Got some of the stuff from the laboratory. Then he put it all over the papers in Mr. McCloud’s desk, one night after school, and they got so fastened together they couldn’t be separated.”

“You don’t mean to say you helped him do that?” asked Frank.

“Who said I did? I only helped make the bird-lime. He told me we could catch rabbits with it. I didn’t know what he was up to or I wouldn’t have done that much. When he learned he was discovered, for he left his knife in the desk, he said he was going to make me take part of the blame for helping him make the lime. That’s what I was afraid of this morning, when I heard he was going to be expelled.”

“He did try to give you away,” interrupted Bart.

“Yes, rather mean, too. But it seems Mr. McCloud had been investigating, though I didn’t know it. He must have found out that I didn’t have any hand in putting the stuff in the desk, even if I did help John make it.”

“Lucky for you that he did,” commented Ned. “Do you think John will try to do anything more to make trouble for you?”

“I hope not,” Fenn replied.

“He was always up to tricks,” commented Frank. “Once he daubed tar on the bottoms of his shoes and walked through the classroom, leaving black marks all over. He pasted paper caps on the pestle when the chemistry class was going to recite and Professor Long thought the powder he was mixing went off at the wrong time.”

“Yes, and do you remember the time he whistled like a bird in school,” put in Ned, “and made the teacher believe a canary was loose somewhere. My, but he can whistle!” he went on. “He can do as well as some of the fellows on the stage. I’m sorry he got expelled, but I’m glad you’re out of it, Stumpy.”

CHAPTER II

THE WRONG SLIDE

THE four boys spent some time discussing the affair of the morning, and speculating as to what John Newton would do now that he could no longer attend school.

"Guess he'll not worry much," remarked Fenn. "He was saying the other day he thought he'd go off somewhere and try to get work in the city."

"Work? He's too lazy to work," put in Ned.

"He said he'd like to get a job in a theater," Fenn added.

"Shoving scenery around, or being part of the mob in Julius Cæsar would be his limit, I guess," said Bart.

"Speaking of Cæsar reminds me that Fenn fell down in his Latin this morning," said Frank.

"Yes, I should have boned away on it last night but I didn't," admitted Stumpy.

"I know why," put in Ned.

"Why?"

"Saw you out walking with Jennie Smith, and I s'pose you didn't get in until late."

"Did she recite poetry to you?" asked Frank, for Jennie was somewhat inclined to verse.

"Say you fellows dry up!" exclaimed Fenn. "You don't dare walk with a girl. Don't know how to behave in company!"

"It takes Fenn to please the girls," retorted Ned, and he dodged to escape a blow Stumpy aimed at him. Then the gong rang for the afternoon session and the pupils went back to their classrooms.

While the boys are at their lessons, which is about the only time, save when they are asleep, that they are not talking or doing something, there will be opportunity of telling who they are.

Ned Wilding's mother had been dead some years. His father was cashier in the only bank in Darewell, a thriving manufacturing town not far from Lake Erie. The Still river ran through the place and it was a journey of about ten miles to the lake on that stream.

Frank Roscoe lived with his uncle Abner Dent, who was a wealthy farmer, residing on the outskirts of the town. Frank had been with his relative as long as he could remember. He never knew his father or mother, and his uncle never

mentioned them. The boy had been brought up with the idea that both his parents were dead. He was a manly youth, but there was a certain strangeness and an air of mystery about him. It was puzzling to his comrades, though they liked him none the less for it.

As for Bart Keene, it would be hard to find a finer specimen of American boy. He was stout and sturdy, and would rather play ball than eat. His father, who was proprietor of a large factory, used to say Bart talked sports in his sleep. Bart had a sister Alice, as gentle as he was rough, though his roughness was not at all offensive. She had an idea she would like to be a trained nurse, and used every opportunity of practicing for her chosen profession. Let any one cut his finger, or run a sliver into it and Alice would exclaim:

“Oh, do let me bandage it up! I’m so glad it happened — no, I don’t mean that — I mean it’s such good practice for me!” Then she would hustle around for salve and strips of cloth and render first-aid-to-the-injured after the most approved fashion.

You couldn’t help liking Fenn Masterson. “Stumpy” was the jolliest chap in seven counties, his friends used to say, and, it seemed with truth. He had blue eyes that always seemed to be laugh-

ing at you, as though his very figure, about as broad as it was long, was the best joke in the world.

But Fenn was not proud of his shape. He often deplored it, especially when he went walking with a girl, which he did whenever he got the chance. Stumpy was fond of the girls, and some of them liked him,—especially Jennie Smith already mentioned. She used to confide to her chum, Alice Keene, that Fenn reminded her somewhat of Falstaff, whom you can read about in Shakespeare, if you wish.

The boys had been chums all through the grammar school and their friendship was further cemented when they continued on at the high school. They were four of the best-liked boys in the institution, and the leaders when it came to sport, fun or doings of any sort. They were generally seen together and if anything was undertaken the "Darewell Chums," as they were called from the name of the town, were sure to be found in the van.

The boys lived in the same neighborhood in the better part of the place, all save Frank, whose uncle's house was about a mile outside the town, but on the same highway on which his chums resided.

Going home from school that afternoon the four chums saw John Newton standing on a street corner. As they passed him John called:

“Hey Stumpy, I want to speak to you a minute.”

Fenn dropped behind his chums and spoke to John for some time. Ned, Bart and Frank walked on, and then waited for him.

“Is he going to pay you off?” asked Ned, as Fenn joined his companions.

“No, he wanted to tell me he was sorry he tried to throw the blame on me.”

“Look out for him, Stumpy,” advised Bart.

“Oh John is thoughtless, but he doesn't mean anything bad,” Fenn said. “I guess this was quite a lesson for him.”

In school the next afternoon Frank, Bart and Fenn each received a note from Ned, the papers being passed along in that mysterious postal fashion which prevails in all schools. The missives read:

“Watch for some fun at the science lecture.”

This was a talk given every Friday afternoon by Professor Long, who used stereoptican slides. The lecture was usually on some popular topic.

It was quite a large class that assembled in the

darkened laboratory at the last period of the afternoon. The professor began his talk. It was about volcanoes, and he described their formation, the theories regarding them, and the causes for their terrific action.

"I will now throw on the screen," the instructor said, "a picture of Mt. Vesuvius in full action. It is a wonderful view of a wonderful phenomenon."

There was a moment's delay, and he slipped a slide into the lantern. Ned nudged his chums.

"Watch!" he whispered.

The next instant there was shown on the screen a picture of a boy setting off a giant fire-cracker under the chair of a sleeping man, who was depicted in the act of rising high into the air under the propulsion of the pyrotechnic. It was an interruption, but one not down on the program.

CHAPTER III

A QUEER CHARACTER

A CHORUS of laughter broke out among the students. It certainly was mirth-provoking to see that picture in place of the fire and clouds of smoke from the volcano. The class was in an uproar.

Professor Long waited patiently until the noise had subsided. He even allowed the wrong slide to remain on the screen. The boys finally ceased laughing. Then the instructor spoke.

“I presume that was done as a joke,” he said. “If so I think it was a very poor one. I don’t mind fun, but I like it in the right place. A certain amount is good, even in the schoolroom.”

His tone was sarcastic now, and Ned began to feel a little uncomfortable.

“You young gentlemen,” and he seemed to hesitate at the word, “you young gentlemen are sent here to learn. If you can do so and have fun, all right. I am paid by the city to teach you. I am expected to put a certain amount of knowl-

edge into your brains. I can't unless you let me. I'm not a magician."

"I thought you would be interested in this lecture. It seems you would rather have a lot of horse-play and rowdyism instead. If I had known that I might have provided a different set of pictures. But not in school hours. The school authorities expect me to instruct you in physics and chemistry; not in foolishness. Young gentlemen, the lecture is over, but you can remain in your seats in the darkness until the usual hour for dismissing the class."

This was a different ending to the joke than Ned had anticipated. It was he who had put the wrong slide in with the others, having had access to the laboratory that morning. There were several murmurs from the boys not in on the plot. They did not relish sitting in the darkness for half an hour.

Professor Long began putting away the apparatus. He withdrew the firecracker slide and turned out the stereopticon. Then Ned did a manly thing.

"Professor Long," he called, out of the darkness. "I want to apologize to you and the class. I put the wrong picture into the pile. I'm sorry and I'll not do it again."

A silence ensued. The boys wondered at Ned's pluck in acknowledging his fault. But then he and his chums were that kind of boys.

"I can't excuse your conduct under any circumstances, Wilding," said Professor Long, sternly. "Still I will admit I like your manliness in admitting your fault. In view of what you have said, and as it is evident the other boys had no hand in it, I will go on with the lecture. But I must ask you to withdraw, and, as a punishment you will write out fifty lines of Cæsar after school."

It was a task that made some of the boys catch their breaths. But Ned felt he deserved it, though he said to himself the joke was worth it. He left the laboratory, and the lecture went on. He remained after school and completed his penance. Professor Long, who had some experiments to prepare for the next week's work, had also stayed after school.

"Don't do it again, Wilding," was all he said, and Ned was almost sure he saw the teacher smile.

Ned found his chums waiting for him. They were a little diffident about referring to the joke, but Ned had no such scruples.

"That was a sort of a boomerang," he remarked. "I spent fifty cents getting that slide, and to think

how it turned out! Long is pretty touchy when it comes to his lectures. I guess I'll not monkey with 'em again."

"Well, you missed a lot of fun," said Frank slowly. "He told us a lot of interesting stuff about volcanoes."

"Bet none of 'em could match mine," came from Ned, with a laugh. "Mine was up-to-date."

"What you going to do to-morrow?" asked Bart of his friends.

"Nothing special," replied Ned.

"Can't we arrange a ball game?" inquired Fenn.

"I tried to but couldn't," said Bart. "Supposing we all go fishing?"

"Fine!" was the general cry.

"All right, meet at the Point, with lines and poles, at nine o'clock to-morrow and we'll go to the Riffles."

The Point was a tongue of land extending out into the river about a mile above the town. It was a favorite place for swimming as there was a sort of sandy beach there. The Riffles were a series of shallow spots about two miles above the point, and from there on up was good fishing.

The river near the Riffles ran through a dense woods which were seldom visited.

Promptly on time the boys were at the meeting place. They had with them everything needed for a day's fishing, from bait and poles to a lunch for themselves, as they did not intend coming back until afternoon.

The boys tramped through the woods toward the fishing holes, which they had often visited. They were talking of the events of the previous day at school, and Ned was explaining over again how he substituted the wrong picture slide.

"Here, where are you boys going?" a voice suddenly hailed them from the bushes that lined the path they were traveling.

They looked up, to see an old man, with a white straggling beard, which fell almost to his waist, peering at them. He was half hidden by the underbrush.

"Where you going?" he repeated.

"Fishing," replied Ned.

"Whereabouts?"

"Up at the Riffles," said Fenn.

"Better not," cautioned the aged person.

"It's a dangerous place."

The man stepped forth into full view. The

boys saw he was poorly dressed. His trousers were quite ragged and his coat was torn in several places. He wore no hat.

“What makes you think so?” asked Frank.

“Don’t let it be known,” the old man went on, “but the King of Paprica holds dominion over the Riffles. He has forbidden any one, under pain of being fed to the sacred crocodile, from taking the green bull frog from the pool.”

“He’s crazy,” whispered Bart.

“But we’re after fish, not bull frogs,” interposed Frank, who seemed inclined to humor the strange man.

“Oh, in that case, don’t forget to bait your hooks with soft soap,” said the old man, as he held up a warning finger. “Now remember, not a word to the King of Paprica if you meet him. He knows I’m here on guard, so don’t tell him,” and with that the old man, winking at Frank as though there was a good joke between them, vanished amid the bushes.

“Well, of all queer things,” said Ned softly.

“He’s daffy,” spoke Bart. “Escaped from some asylum, I suppose. However he looks harmless. Come on, we don’t want to get mixed up with him. We’re out for fish.”

“I’d like to find out more about him,” came

from Frank. "He winked at me as though it was some sort of a trick."

"Yes, the kind Ned played yesterday," exclaimed Frank.

"No more from yours truly," uttered the perpetrator of the wrong slide. "No more jokes for a while. I'm going fishing. Come on."

CHAPTER IV

A HUT IN THE WOODS

THE boys tried to learn in which direction the old man had gone, but he was not in sight. They listened to hear if he was tramping through the bushes, but there was not a sound.

“Looks as though he went through a hole in the earth,” spoke Fenn. “But never mind. His keepers are probably after him. He seems harmless enough.”

“Sometimes that’s the worst kind,” commented Ned. “We had better be on the lookout for him. He might come upon us unexpectedly.”

But the boys reached the Riffles a little while after this, and, in the excitement of hauling out a number of fish, for the sport was good, they forgot about the queer old man.

“I wonder who he could have been?” asked Frank, after a silence of half an hour following the landing of several chub and perch.

“Who?” asked Ned.

“The King of Paprica.”

“ Oh, him. I'd forgotten all about it. What makes you keep thinking of it? ”

“ I can't help it, ” replied Frank, so solemnly that his chums looked at him in some surprise. “ I believe there is something about that man which will bear investigating. No one ever heard of a crazy person being loose in these woods before, and there's no lunatic asylum near by from which he could have escaped. I tell you it looks queer. ”

“ Sometimes lunatics travel hundreds of miles, ” put in Bart. “ I read of one, once, that escaped, and was found a good while afterward in some place in Europe. ”

“ Say, did we come here to talk about odd folks or to fish? ” asked Ned somewhat sharply. “ If we're going to fish let's do it. All this talk will scare 'em away. ”

“ That's what I say, ” added Fenn. “ Let's finish up and go home. ”

“ Got a date to take a walk and gather wild flowers with some girl, Stumpy? ” asked Frank.

“ Well, it's as much fun as talking about a crazy man, ” retorted Fenn.

“ Whoop! I've got a big one! ” ejaculated Ned, and he pulled a wiggling beauty ashore.

It was the best catch so far, and the other boys

congratulated Ned on his luck. Several other large-sized fish were pulled out after that until the boys' baskets were nearly full.

"Haven't we got plenty?" asked Frank. "Let's quit and eat."

"Good enough!" exclaimed Bart. "I've got a vacancy just beneath my belt," and he patted the region of his stomach in a suggestive manner.

Frank, who had charge of the lunch basket, into which the boys had put what they had brought from home, opened it. As he was handing around the sandwiches there was a noise in the bushes behind where the lads were seated. They started, thinking it might be the strange man again, but they were relieved when they saw it was Jim Nelson, who had the reputation of being the laziest boy in town.

"Hello, Jim," called Ned.

"Um," grunted Jim. It seemed too much of an effort to speak. "Bait?" he asked, with a motion toward his own fishing tackle which he carried over his shoulder.

"Well, if you aren't the limit!" exclaimed Ned. "You started off fishing and depended on finding some one to lend you the bait. Too lazy to dig it, I suppose?"

"Tired," responded Jim, as if that explained it all. "Throw over," he added, which the boys construed into a request that the bait can be passed over, since Jim had flopped down in a comfortable attitude on the bank.

"The very nerve of you makes you a delight," spoke Bart as he tossed the tin can where Jim could get it. The bait fell a little out of the lazy lad's reach. Instead of getting up for it he looked around in search of a stick with which he could poke it toward himself. There was one near his foot.

Jim reached out until he could touch the tree branch with the toe of his shoe. Then he manipulated the little club until he could get his fingers on it, which took several minutes. Once it was in his hands he managed to reach the bait can and drew it toward him. All this while he was stretched out on his back.

Still in this position he baited his hook and then, without looking to see where it landed, he threw the weighted line in the direction of the river. The hook struck just on the edge of the bank on which Jim reclined, but he could not see this and thought it had dropped into the water. The chums looked on at this exhibition of laziness, though it was no new thing to them.

“Think you’ll catch anything, Jim?” asked Frank.

“Hope not, have to pull it in, and I’m tired,” responded the recumbent lad.

“Oh, we’ll do it for you,” said Bart.

“Um,” grunted Jim, that probably being his thanks.

The four comrades were munching their sandwiches, and once in a while Jim would turn his head and look at them. He was hungry but too lazy to ask for something to eat.

“Watch me,” whispered Ned to his companions, and then he prepared to tantalize Jim.

Ned took a piece of cake and tied it to a string. The cord he fastened to the end of his fishing pole and then, moving silently through the bushes, he took a position directly behind Jim, and some distance away.

Slowly Ned raised the pole with its dangling string and bit of cake until the latter was poised right over Jim’s head. Then he slowly lowered the dainty until it was within a few inches of Jim’s mouth.

“A new way to feed lazy folks,” observed Bart in a low tone.

The cake was held there a few minutes, but Jim seemed unaware of its presence. Ned could not

understand it. Then Fenn looked over and saw that Jim was asleep.

“Can’t have the trick spoiled that way,” murmured Frank, and tossed a little pebble that hit Jim on the face. The lazy boy opened his eyes, and saw the choice bit of cake directly over his mouth. It was coming right down to him, after the manner in which cocoanuts, bananas and oranges are said to drop into the hands of the happy dwellers in tropical climes.

“Now for some fun,” whispered Fenn.

The cake was almost in Jim’s mouth. He opened his jaws. A happy look came over his face. He had his lips on the dainty, when, with a quick motion, Ned jerked it away.

Jim was so surprised he did not know what to do. The disgusted look on his face made the other boys burst into a roar of laughter. Jim raised himself on his elbow and looked at the conspirators.

“Um!” he ejaculated. He was too lazy to get mad. Then he went off in another doze.

Ned went back to join his companions, all of them still laughing at the joke.

“Let’s make him believe he’s caught something,” suggested Fenn. “Tie something to his line.”

"It's your turn," spoke Ned, and Fenn nodded assent.

He made his way quietly down the bank until he could pull Jim's hook from the water which just touched it. He fastened something to it and then gave the line a sudden yank. Jim had the pole tied to his wrist to prevent a possible big fish from taking it away from him as he slept, and Fenn's jerk awakened him.

"Got one," announced Jim, not bothering to sit up straight. Then he began to pull in. The line came up with a suddenness that surprised him, as Fenn let go, and an old rubber boot, that Stumpy had attached, flew over and struck the lazy lad in the face.

"It's a whopper!" he cried until he saw what it was. Then, with a disgusted look at the plotters he turned over and went to sleep again.

"What can you do with a fellow like that?" asked Ned appealing to his chums.

"Death will never overtake him," replied Frank. "It will pass him on the road, thinking Jim has already passed in. He certainly is the last word in laziness."

The four comrades decided they had enough fishing for the day, so, putting away their tackle and adding some fresh wet grass to the baskets of

fish in order to keep them cool, they started for home.

“Let’s take the short cut,” suggested Frank. “Right through the woods.”

“Do you know it?” asked Ned. “I nearly got lost once, going that way.”

“I guess I can pick it out.”

So they began their tramp. But they had not gone more than a mile along the half-discernable path before Frank, who was in the lead, uttered an exclamation.

“See a snake?” asked Bart.

“No, but here’s a hut that I never noticed before,” was Frank’s answer. “I wonder if I am on the wrong path. It looks right but I never saw this shack.”

The boys gathered around him. On one side of the path, in a little clearing, half hidden among the trees, was a small log cabin. It looked as though it had always been there, but the boys were sure it must have been erected recently.

“There’s something painted over the door,” said Bart.

The boys looked. There, in brilliant red letters, were the words:

CHAPTER V.

THE CHALLENGE

“WELL what do you think of that?” asked Ned. “Talk about queer coincidences, here’s one! Now if only the crazy man would appear we —”

“Some one is coming,” exclaimed Frank, as a noise was heard near the hut.

The next instant a short stout man, with black hair and a blacker moustache, came around the corner of the hut. On his head he wore a little gilt crown.

“There’s the King of Paprica!” whispered Bart, but not so low as to prevent the man hearing him.

“At your service,” replied the man, with a bow.

For a few seconds the boys did not know whether to laugh or run. It was certainly a very strange affair, coupled with what the old man had said to them.

“Are you really —” began Fenn, when the man held up a warning hand.

"Please don't speak of it," he said in a mild voice. "I am here for a certain purpose. Have you seen an old man in these woods? Rather a strange character."

"Something like yourself," said Ned, but in the faintest whisper.

"Yes, we did," replied Frank, who seemed somewhat excited over the sight of the man with the gilt crown. "He said you would know he was on guard. He also —"

"Yes, I know all about it," was the quick answer. "It's very unfortunate. I beg of you not to mention it to any one. I may rely upon you?"

"You may," said Frank so earnestly that his chums wondered whether he knew more about the queer happenings than they did. "We will say nothing."

"It will all come out right in the end," went on the man with the crown. "Which way was he going?"

"He seemed headed in this direction," replied Fenn.

"Then he will arrive in time for the audience," said the King of Paprica. "I must bid you farewell now," and with that he went into the hut and closed the door after him.

The boys stood for a few seconds gazing at the

silent cabin with its odd inscription, and then Bart exclaimed:

“Come on! Let’s get out of here. First thing you know we’ll be getting crazy ourselves. This place isn’t safe!”

He hurried on through the woods and the others followed.

“What do you make of it?” asked Ned.

“Why, it’s plain enough,” spoke Frank. “The old man we met first is crazy, and this one is his keeper. He’s brought him out here into the woods to cure him, and he probably has to humor him by pretending to be a king. That’s all there is to it. I’ve often read of such cases.”

“Seems to me you’re fond of reading about lunatics,” said Bart.

“I am. I read all I can on such cases. It is very fascinating.”

“Excuse me,” broke in Ned. “I’d rather have something cheerful.”

“Oh, but you have no idea what strange fancies some of the unfortunates have,” said Frank earnestly. In his eyes there glowed a strange light, and his chums, looking at him, felt he had more than ever that queer air of mystery about him.

“Well, we’d better be moving faster than this

or we'll be held up again by the King of Paprica's guard," spoke Ned. "I think you're wrong about it, Frank."

"How do you mean?"

"I think both those chaps are crazy. It's a puzzle to tell which one is worse."

"I agree with you," said Bart. "I wouldn't want to meet either one of them here alone in the woods after dark."

"Nonsense," exclaimed Frank. "Why, a lunatic is the easiest person in the world to get along with. All you have to do is to humor him."

"Let him kill you if he feels so disposed?" suggested Fenn.

"No, but if you should meet one, and he asks you to let him shoot you, fall in with his idea."

"Hand him a gun, eh, Frank?" asked Bart.

"No, but, after he sees you are not going to oppose him, incidentally suggest that the moon is in the wrong quarter for a successful killing, or that the hour has not yet arrived, or that you have nine lives like a cat and that he had much better murder some one who has only one life. Ten chances to one he'll agree with you and let you alone."

"I guess that one chance would fall to me," observed Fenn, "and I'll give the lunatics a wide berth. You can have 'em all, Frank."

“Well, I’ve read that’s the best way to act.”

“Oh, you and your reading!” exclaimed Ned.
“Let’s talk about something cheerful.”

The boys hurried on through the woods. More than once they got off the path and had to spend some minutes finding it again, so they did not get home until nearly supper time.

“See you Monday,” called Frank to his chums, as he took the road that led to his uncle’s house.

“There’ll be a ball game next week, I guess,” came from Bart. “You may get a chance to play.”

“All right,” and Frank was off down the road.

“I’d like to see the inside of that hut,” observed Ned as he and the other two boys walked on.

“Still harping on that, eh?” asked Fenn. “I want to forget it.”

“Think we’d better mention anything about the queer men we saw?” asked Bart, as he and Fenn strolled through the shopping district, which was always a lively place on Saturday nights.

“Who to?”

“The police, of course.”

“I don’t see as it’s any of their affair. The men are harmless.”

“But they’re lunatics at large.”

“I guess it’s as Frank says, one is the other’s

keeper. We'd better mind our own affairs. Besides Frank promised, for us, that we'd keep quiet."

"Then I suppose we'd better. But maybe something will happen."

"What, for instance?"

"They might murder some one."

"Say, have you been reading any five-cent libraries lately?"

"No, but —"

"Forget it," counseled Fenn. "Ah, good evening," he added, bowing to a pretty girl who passed them. "Excuse me, Bart. I want to speak to Jennie," and Fenn left his chum.

"That's the way," growled Bart. "A fellow's no good once he gets girls on the brain," and he walked on alone, and quite disgusted with Stumpy.

"Oh, Fenn!" exclaimed Jennie Smith, as the boy joined her. "Isn't it just like a play to see all the lights and the people hurrying back and forth? 'All the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players.' I think that's just grand! Oh I wish I could thrill large audiences!" she added, for her secret desire was to become an actress. "What is this I see before me! Is it a dagger, the handle —!"

But just then Jennie collided with a fat man in

front of her. He turned, good-naturedly and remarked:

“No, young lady, I’m not a dagger, though I’d like to get thin enough to be taken for one.”

Jennie blushed, and Fenn was a little embarrassed. Soon after that Fenn bade Jennie good-night.

Monday morning when the chums reached school there was a buzz of excitement among those gathered on the campus waiting for the nine o’clock gong to ring.

“Here they come now,” called some one. “We’ll see what they say.”

“What’s up?” asked Bart, as he saw the crowd of boys hurrying toward him and his chums.

“We’ve got a challenge!” exclaimed Lem Gordon, pitcher of the school nine, of which Bart was catcher.

“Who from?” asked Bart.

“The Lakeville Prep. school. It’s for Thursday. Dare we take ’em on?”

“We dare do all that may become our school,” paraphrased Frank. “Why not?” He did not play on the regular nine.

“They’re out of our class,” said Lem. “Haven’t lost a game this year, and they’re way

ahead of us. Have better grounds and more time to practice."

"Well, we don't want to show the white feather," said Fenn. "Maybe we'll have a chance."

"We sure will if Lem pitches as he did in the game two weeks ago," spoke Bart. "That certainly won the game for us if anything did."

"Your catching had a lot to do with it," put in Lem, "and so did Ned's fielding."

"To say nothing of Stumpy's work at short," added Bart. "I say let's give 'em a game. They can't any more than wallop us!"

"Hurrah!" yelled the crowd of boys. "Three cheers for Bart!"

"Cut it out!" said Bart. "Think I'm a political candidate? We'll go in with the idea of winning!"

CHAPTER VI

A GREAT GAME OF BALL

WORD soon went around that Bart, who was captain of the nine, had decided to accept the challenge which had come to Harry Mathews as manager of the team. The challenge had only arrived that morning and there were few of the high school boys who believed their nine stood any chance of winning.

The Lakeville Preparatory School was a private institution located about three miles from Darewell. It was attended by youths who were fitted for college there, and the pupils were, on the average, older and larger than the Darewell High School lads. Their nine had an enviable reputation in local sporting circles.

The high school boys were so worked up over the prospect of the game, with rivals they had never yet ventured to play, that there was less attention to lessons than usual among the members of the nine, and their supporters, that morning.

Fenn must have been thinking quite seriously of

the pending contest for, when answering in the ancient history class the question: "Who was Cæsar's greatest rival?" he replied solemnly:

"The Lakeville Prep. School!"

There was a burst of laughter in which even the instructor had to join.

"We'll have to practice for the next three days," said Bart at noon recess. "I'll have to get my new glove limbered up, and, Lem, you'll have to think up some new curves."

"Yes, I need practice all right," responded the pitcher. "Suppose we have a scrub game this afternoon?"

"That suits me," replied Bart.

When school was over a picked nine prepared to give battle to the regular one in order to bring out the weak points.

"Don't you think we ought to have a substitute pitcher?" asked Lem, as he prepared to go into the box.

"You aren't afraid of breaking down, are you?" asked Bart anxiously.

"No, only you never can tell what is going to happen."

"Here you go, Stumpy!" called Bart as his chum was tossing the ball to the right-fielder in the warming-up practice.

Fenn sent the leather spheroid toward the catcher with all the strength of his arm. Bart caught it on his heavy glove. As he did so he called in a low voice to Lem, and the two held a whispered conversation.

“Do you think he can do it?” Lem asked.

“Yes, if we spring it on him suddenly and don’t give him a chance to get nervous. That’s Stumpy’s main fault. But I’m hoping there’ll be no need for it.”

“Well, I’ll do my best,” responded Lem.

The practice game was started, and several weak points developed in the regular high school nine. But Bart was not discouraged. There had been little opportunity for games, of late, and the boys were a trifle slow. He coached them along, suggesting improvements and offering words of advice to some players.

“Good!” cried the captain to Frank, who made a brilliant catch in center field. Frank was playing on the scrub nine. “You’ll be a regular if you keep on.”

Frank was not a natural baseball player. His forte was football, but once in a while he made brilliant plays on the nine, when he took some other player’s place.

“A couple of days more like this and we’ll be fit to give ’em all they want, to beat us,” remarked Bart as the boys gathered up the balls, bats and gloves preparatory to going home.

“If we only could beat ’em!” exclaimed Ned.

“If we hold ’em to a tie I’ll be satisfied,” retorted Bart. “That’s something no high school nine has ever done to ’em.”

For the next two afternoons there was hard practice. On one occasion Bart called on Stumpy to take the pitcher’s box, Lem making an excuse that he wanted to rest his arm. Stumpy wondered at this, as Sandy Merton was the one who usually substituted for Lem. But this time Sandy was left on third, his regular position.

Fenn had no idea he could pitch. He knew he could send in a straight ball, and he did this in practice. When Lem came back in the box on one occasion after Stumpy had been filling it, he asked in a low tone of Bart:

“Will he do?”

“I think so, but don’t say anything.”

The morning of the game the Darewell nine assembled before school, on the campus and indulged in some fast practice. The contest was to take place on the Preparatory school grounds,

and in answer to a general petition Professor McCloud agreed to dismiss all classes an hour earlier that day to enable the journey to be made.

The nine and the substitutes went over in a big stage but the boys and girls who were to be spectators took trolley cars that ran close to the grounds.

“They’re a husky looking lot,” observed Bart as the stage dropped its load close to the diamond, and he observed the other nine on the field. “They play fast, snappy ball, and we’ve got our work cut out for us.”

The Darewell team soon got into practice, their methods being closely watched by their rivals. Captain Benson, of the other club, greeted Bart, and the preliminaries were soon arranged.

“Play ball!” called the umpire, and the game was on.

The visitors had won the toss for innings, and in consequence Lem had to open the struggle. The first ball he pitched went wild, and the next one struck the batter, giving him his base.

“Rotten!” whispered Lem to himself, disgustedly.

“Take it easy,” advised Bart, walking out to the pitcher’s box. “Keep cool.”

The advice did Lem good, and he struck out

the next two men. Then they began to find his curves and he was hit for two single baggers and one three. At the end of the inning the game stood three runs in favor of the Preparatory school.

It was Bart's first turn at the bat, and he managed to get to first on balls. Then Ned lined out a nice two bagger, and Fenn planted one over in right field that enabled Bart and Ned to get in. The inning ended three to two in favor of the home team.

For the next four innings neither side scored. It was a pitchers' battle and Lem was doing fine work. But, on the other hand few of the Darewell boys could find the curves of the Preparatory school's pitcher.

The next inning the home team got in three more runs and the visitors two, making the score four to six, against the high school boys.

"We've got to do better than this," said Bart, as his team came to the bat for the eighth inning which had netted the Preparatory team one run, making their total seven.

The high school team seemed to "take a brace," for they made three runs by hard work.

"That ties 'em!" cried Bart excitedly, as he came to the bat. "Now to beat 'em."

As he spoke there was some sort of a commotion near the bench where the Darewell players were sitting. Then came a cry:

“Ouch! My wrist! Let up, Sandy!”

“What’s the matter?” asked the captain, running over to where he saw a struggle.

“Oh, Sandy Merton tried to play a trick on Lem,” explained Ned. “He’s always up to some foolishness.”

“I was only showing a new wrestling hold,” said Sandy. “My foot slipped and I fell on him.”

“Are you hurt, Lem?” asked the captain.

“Wrist sprained, I guess,” and he extended his hand which was beginning to swell.

“That settles your pitching,” remarked Bart. “Pity you aren’t left handed. Well, it’s a good thing we provided for an emergency. Sandy, you ought to have better sense,” and he spoke sternly.

“Oh, if you’re going to act that way about it I’ll not play,” and Sandy started away.

“Suit yourself,” said Bart calmly. “Frank, you take third in Sandy’s place.”

“Who’ll pitch?” asked Ned.

“I’ll decide when the inning’s over,” replied Bart, as he went back to the bat.

Probably the little scene made Bart nervous, for he struck out, an unusual thing with him. That put the side out, the inning ending in the tie score. There was little apprehension in the ranks of the Preparatory team, but there were anxious hearts among the high school supporters. The cheering died away.

"Stumpy; you pitch," called Bart.

"Me! Why I can't pitch! I never pitched a regular game."

"I'm captain, and you pitch," said Bart decidedly, and much amazed at his selection Stumpy walked into the box.

The suddenness of it was just his salvation. He had no chance to get nervous.

"Can he do it?" asked Ned, as he started for his place.

"He's got a fine, natural curve," replied Bart. "I never noticed it until the other day. Discovered it by accident. I think he'll make good."

And Stumpy did. He hardly knew how he did it, but he had a knack of throwing the ball that fooled the best batters on the other team. He struck out the first two men, and there arose murmurs of anxiety among the rivals.

"Why didn't they put him in first?" asked

the captain of the home team of some of his men, wondering why so good a pitcher had been left to the last.

The third batter managed to plant the leather in a long flight in the direction of third base. But Frank was right on the alert. He made a splendid jump and caught it, putting the side out minus a run. There was a wild burst of cheering from the high school girls and boys.

“Only takes one run to beat 'em!” exclaimed Bart as his team went to the bat for the last time. “Somebody get it!”

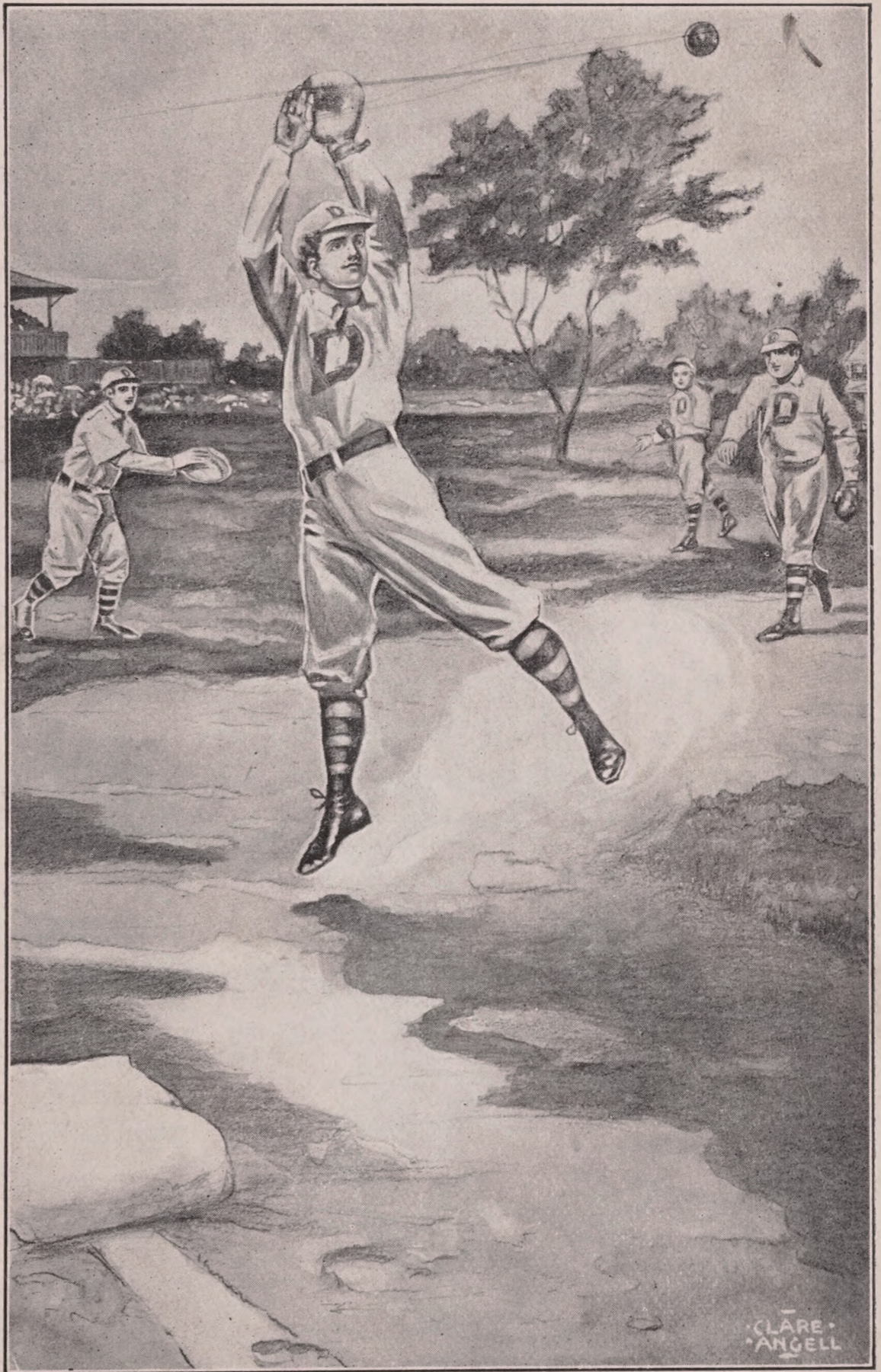
Somebody did. It was Ned, who came first to the plate. He lined a beauty just over the center fielder's head, and got two bases on it. Joe Wright brought him in, and such a yell as went up from the high school crowd was seldom heard on that diamond.

“That does it!” yelled Bart, capering about. “Stumpy! you're all to the good!”

“But Ned won the game,” objected Fenn.

“Your pitching held them down just when they would have walked away from us. You're all to the good, Stumpy!”

“Three cheers for Stumpy!” called some one, and they came with a vim that made Fenn blush.



HE MADE A SPLENDID JUMP AND CAUGHT IT, PUTTING THE SIDE OUT
MINUS A RUN—Page 46



CHAPTER VII

ALICE HAS A CHANCE

THE four chums were certainly regarded as the heroes of the school that day, for they had been instrumental in winning a victory that went down in the history of the institution as a most brilliant one.

"I didn't know you had it in you, Stumpy," said Ned, as the nine reached the high school grounds on the return trip.

"Me either," replied Fenn. "It sort of 'growed,' like Topsy in Uncle Tom's Cabin."

"To think of beating the Preps," murmured Bart. "It's the finest thing that ever happened."

"How's your wrist, Lem?" asked Frank.

"Hurts like the mischief. Sandy came down on it with all his force."

"Say, I wonder if he meant that?" asked Fenn.

"Meant it? What do you mean?" asked Bart.

"Well it looked queer," went on Fenn.

“There we were in a tie game and we needed every advantage we could get to hold it. Then Sandy gets up to one of his tricks, and he might have known something would happen. It always does when he tries his funny work.”

“You don’t mean to say you think he deliberately hurt me, do you?” asked Lem, winding his handkerchief around the swollen wrist.

“Well, I wouldn’t want to accuse any one unjustly,” Stumpy continued. “But I heard he was going around saying things about being done out of his place as substitute pitcher, in practice, by me. Maybe he thought he’d just hurt Lem a little so’s he could have a chance to finish out the game.”

“I’d hate to believe it of him,” remarked the captain, “but he certainly did act rather strange. He went off angry, too. Well, it can’t be helped. Guess we’d better not say anything about it unless he tries to do something else. Come on to the drug store, Lem, and we’ll get some arnica for that wrist.”

Most of the boys dispersed at the school campus where the stage had left them, but the four chums, with Lem in their midst, walked up the street together.

“I wouldn’t be afraid to tackle ’em again,”

observed Ned. "We've got their measure now."

"Maybe they'll ask for a return game," said Bart. "Hello," he added, "here comes my sister and Jennie Smith. Look out, Stumpy, or Jennie will be doing the Juliet act to you."

"Guess not," spoke Fenn, and he started to walk away, but Ned held him.

"Don't desert in the face of the enemy," he said, and Fenn had to stay.

"Oh, is some one hurt?" cried Alice, as she saw the cloth around Lem's wrist. "How nice! I mean how fortunate I happened to meet you! Now I will have a chance to treat you!"

"Going to treat us to ice cream sodas?" asked her brother unfeelingly.

"Don't be foolish, Bart! What is it Lem; is your wrist broken?"

"Only sprained, I think."

"Let me look at it," demanded Alice, and, regardless of the crowd that gathered, when the five boys and two girls formed a group on the sidewalk, Alice proceeded to undo the handkerchief and other cloth Lem had wound about his wrist.

"Wait a minute," said Alice. "I must look at my book on first-aid-to-the-injured to make sure what it is," and she took a little volume from a

bag she carried on her arm. Rapidly turning the pages she read:

“ ‘A sprain is the result of violent twisting, stretching or partial tearing of the ligaments about a joint, and there is often a fracture at the ends of the bones.’ Are you sure there isn’t a fracture, Lem? I’d love to treat a fracture as I never had a chance at one yet.”

“I hope not,” murmured the disabled pitcher. “It’s bad enough as it is.”

He was rather uneasy under the pressure Alice brought to bear on his wrist as she turned it this way and that, in an endeavor to see if it was broken.

“Do I hurt you?” she asked.

“Well — er — that is — no!” and Lem shut his teeth tightly together.

“Come right over to the drug store,” spoke Alice, as she led Lem by the injured wrist. He tried not to show the pain she unconsciously caused him. “I will get some hot water and hold your hand in it for an hour and a half.”

“Half an hour’s enough,” Lem said. “I haven’t got time for any more.”

“I must go by the book,” Alice declared firmly.

“A good nurse always does that.”

Alice walked into the drug store, leading Lem

as though she had done that sort of thing all her life. The four chums followed.

“Some hot water please, in a deep basin,” requested Alice of the clerk, and, though the man behind the counter looked in wonder at the strange cavalcade, he brought out the basin full of the steaming liquid.

“Put your wrist in,” commanded Alice as she rolled up Lem’s sleeve.

He thrust his arm in, half way to the elbow.

“Ouch!” he yelled. “It’s hot!”

“Of course it is,” replied the girl coolly, “it has to be. Now while we are waiting the hour and a half let’s talk about the game. It will help you to forget the pain. Maybe Bart has money for some ice cream soda.”

“I’ll buy ’em,” said Lem, trying to get his uninjured hand into his pocket.

“You’ll do nothing of the sort,” decided Alice. “You’re a patient. Whoever heard of a patient standing treat?” and she motioned to her brother.

CHAPTER VIII

THE STRANGE BOATMAN

BART went over to the soda fountain and ordered "something for all hands" as he expressed it. Meanwhile Alice remained at Lem's side, holding his wrist down well under the hot water. Lem's face had lost some of its pained look. The heat was reducing the swelling and, consequently, the pressure.

"Will you kindly get me some cotton and bandages ready?" asked Alice of the clerk, and he produced them at once.

"When you going to graduate as a trained nurse?" asked Bart, as he came back, a glass of soda in each hand.

"Little boys shouldn't ask the nurse questions," spoke Alice, with a laugh.

"I say, how's Lem going to eat his?" asked Frank. "He's only got one hand, and it's hard work dishing up the cream with a long handled spoon if you don't hold the glass."

"You boys will have to hold mine and Lem's,"

said Alice. "We can eat with one hand then," and so it was done. Bart held Lem's glass and Fenn took charge of Alice's. When they finished the boys who had acted as soda-bearers regaled themselves on the beverage.

"Say, Alice, how long before that'll be done? It's been boiling half an hour now," remarked Bart.

"More hot water, please," the girl requested of the clerk. "A little longer," she added to her brother. "Then I'm going to bandage it and we can go."

To give her credit Alice did bandage the sprained wrist quite well. She opened her first-aid book on the counter in front of her and followed a diagram showing how to fold the cloth. The druggist complimented her on her skill.

"This is my first big case," said Alice with a smile. She was very much in earnest over it, however lightly the boys treated her ambition. "I hope I have some more soon."

"Well, I hope it isn't me," said Lem.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you," said Alice, looking a little offended.

"Oh, I didn't mean that!" Lem hastened to add. "It feels ever so much better. I meant I hope I won't get hurt again. The season is

young yet and we've lots of games ahead of us."

"Guess we'll have to take Alice along to look after the wounded," said Frank. "She'll be the mascot."

"Somebody was mascot to-day all right," came from Bart. "We certainly were in luck. Stumpy, hereafter you're the regular substitute pitcher. Sandy Merton can consider himself released."

It was dusk when the little group left the drug store to go to their several homes.

"You must come and report to me to-morrow," said Alice as she bade Lem good-bye. "Be careful to keep the bandage on."

"I will," he promised.

His house was in the opposite direction to that which the four chums took. The chums walked on slowly together, Alice and Jennie hurrying away to do an errand for Mrs. Keene. As the boys turned a corner they almost collided with a man who was walking quickly in the opposite direction.

"I beg pardon!" he muttered as he passed through the group of lads. They were too surprised to respond and when Bart did think to say, "certainly," the man was several feet away hurrying up the street. The boys gazed after him.

"Don't you know who that is?" asked Ned suddenly.

"No; friend of yours?" inquired Fenn.

"I'm sure it's the man we met in the woods Saturday."

"Who, the crazy man?"

"No, the one at the hut—the King of Paprica—though he may be crazy for all I know. I recognized him as he hurried past me.

"Are you sure?" asked Frank.

"Positive."

"He didn't have his crown on," spoke Bart.

"And his clothes were not the same," put in Fenn.

"That doesn't make any difference," insisted Ned. "I am sure it was the same man. I'll bet there's some mystery here, and it's up to us to solve it," he added.

"I don't see why," said Frank.

"Why haven't we as good a right as any one?"

"I'm certain this man, if he is the one we saw at the hut, is the keeper of that poor lunatic we first met in the woods. Now what's the use of bothering them. They have troubles enough," replied Frank.

"Well, I want to get a look inside that hut," went on Ned, "and I'm going to, some day."

"Your curiosity may get you into trouble," spoke Frank, a little seriously.

"It won't be the first time," and Ned laughed.

"Well, whoever he is, he was in a great hurry," said Fenn. "Maybe the lunatic is sick and he's going to get some medicine for him."

By this time the man was out of sight, and, after a little further talk the boys went on.

Some one must have told Sandy Merton what Bart said about his being released from the team, for the next day he approached the nine's captain on the school campus.

"I hear you said I couldn't play on the team any more," Sandy said to Bart.

"That's what I did. Who told you?"

"That's none of your affair. But I tell you I am going to play."

"You refused to obey an order from the captain," said Bart. "Not that I'm better than any of the other players, but they elected me captain and I'm going to run the nine or resign. You can't play as long as I'm captain."

"We'll see how long you'll be captain then," muttered Sandy, as he walked away.

"Think he means anything?" asked Fenn of Bart.

"I don't care whether he does or not. I'm

sorry to have to act that way, but if the team's going to amount to anything it's got to obey orders. If you fellows don't want me for captain, say the word and I'll resign."

"Resign nothing!" exclaimed Ned. "I'd like to see you do it. Eh, fellows?"

"That's right!" came from the crowd that had heard what Sandy said.

"Let's go for a row on the river after school," suggested Bart to his chums during the noon recess, and they agreed. The boys jointly owned a well-equipped boat in which they frequently made trips down to the lake. It was a four-oared barge, roomy and comfortable, though not speedy.

"Shall we bring our fishing tackle along?" asked Ned.

"You can if you like," replied Bart. "I'm not going to. I'm just going to take it easy."

Quite a crowd of boys went to the river after school. Some took their swimming suits, while others went to fish or row, as a number of them had boats. The four chums soon got their craft out from the house, at a public dock, where it was kept.

"Who'll row?" asked Frank.

"Draw lots," suggested Bart, and the choice fell to Ned and Fenn.

“Up or down?” asked Fenn.

“Row up and float down,” said Ned. “We don’t want to be working all the while.”

They went up the stream for two or three miles, and Frank, who had borrowed Ned’s fishing tackle, cast in. But the fish did not seem to be biting.

“Put up a little further,” suggested Frank. “We’re almost to the Riffles. I’d like to get a bite as long as I’m at it.”

As the boat was sent round a turn of the river the boys caught sight of another craft in which a man was seated. His boat appeared to be anchored, and as he stood in the bow he reached down into the water with a long pole and seemed to be pulling something up.

He did this several times, and on each occasion would carefully examine the end of the pole which he had stuck into the river.

“That’s an odd proceeding,” remarked Bart, as he looked at the lone boatman.

CHAPTER IX

A PLOT AGAINST BART

THE man seemed to pay no attention to the approach of the boys' boat. He kept on dipping the long pole into the water, shoving it down as far as it would go, and then carefully examining the end of it. As the chums came nearer they saw he was conducting his investigations by means of a large magnifying glass.

"Must be small fish he's after," observed Frank.

"Why it's the luna —" began Fenn, as he looked at the man, whose boat was now opposite that of the boys.

"Hush!" exclaimed Frank, and Fenn did not finish the sentence.

The chums saw the man was the strange person they had met in the woods. At the same time the fellow looked up and seemed to recognize them.

"Have you seen the King of Paprica?" he asked, as he laid down his pole and began to pull up the rope attached to a small anchor.

“Not to-day,” replied Bart. “What are you fishing for, if I may ask?”

“You certainly may,” was the answer. “I am probing for bullets.”

“For bullets?”

“Yes, you see the king observed some one shooting up the river last night, and he directed me to probe for the bullets.”

“Shooting up the river?” inquired Ned.

“Yes, in a boat, you know. Did you think I meant a gun? How could one shoot up in a gun? But don’t mention to the king that you saw me. He’s not expecting to hear from me, and it might annoy him,” and the man allowed the boat to drift down stream again before he brought it to anchor. Then he began sticking the pole down into the mud and resumed his operation of examining the end with the magnifying glass.

“Crazy as a loon,” remarked Frank, in a low tone. “Row on, fellows.”

“I’d like to go ashore and have a look into that hut,” remarked Ned.

“Better not,” cautioned Frank. “There!” he exclaimed, “I’ve got one,” and he pulled in a fine large fish.

He had several bites after that, and, becoming interested in his success, Ned and Fenn rowed

further up stream where the fishing was better. Frank caught eight fish before the boys decided to go home. They looked for the strange man in the boat, as they floated past where he had been, but he was not in sight, nor was his craft to be seen.

“Something’s up,” remarked Ned to Bart, as they met the next Monday on the school campus.

“What do you mean?”

“Keep your eye on Sandy Merton.”

Indeed Sandy did seem to be unusually busy. He went about from one part of the grounds to another, talking first with one boy and then with another. Most of them were lads with whom the chums were not on very familiar terms.

“What do you s’pose he’s up to?” asked Bart.

“Can’t guess, unless it has something to do with baseball.”

“I’m going to find out,” spoke Bart.

He approached one of the boys with whom he had seen Sandy conversing.

“What was Sandy asking you, if it’s no secret?” inquired the captain of the nine.

“Well, it is a sort of secret,” replied Fred Jenkins. “You’ll hear of it soon enough though,” and he turned away.

“Looks like a plot,” commented Ned with an uneasy laugh.

Several other boys, whom Bart asked regarding Sandy's activities, returned evasive answers. None of the intimate friends of the chums had been approached. Bart had no time to pursue his inquiries further as the bell rang for school to assemble.

At noon, however Sandy's actions were explained. On a bulletin board, used to post announcements of athletic and other school events, was this notice:

"There will be a meeting of the Athletic Committee this afternoon to take action on a certain matter."

"That's some of Sandy's work," said Bart. "Well I'm ready for whatever happens."

Several boys crowded around the board to read the notice. Sandy was not among them.

"Who wrote it?" inquired a number.

"Whoever did was afraid to sign his name," commented Bart. "It's in printing, so we couldn't tell whose writing it is. Well, I'll be at the meeting."

It was an expectant group that gathered in the court which was used, after school, for sessions of the various clubs and teams. Sandy was on hand,

talking earnestly to a number of the pupils. Finally he walked up to the big iron post where the chairman of whatever gathering was called, usually stood.

"We're here to elect a new captain of the High School baseball nine," Sandy announced.

"What's that?" asked several, and the four chums looked at one another.

"I'm a member of the Athletic Committee," went on Sandy. "I called this meeting."

"It takes a majority of the committee to call a session," interrupted Ned.

"Well, a majority did," responded Sandy. "Fred Jenkins, Peter Rand, and John Andrews, with myself, constitute a majority. There are only seven members. Now we've decided to have an election for a new captain," Sandy went on. "There's some objection to the present one," and he looked at Bart.

"Who from?" called Fenn.

"Plenty; ain't there fellows?" asked Sandy, turning to a group of his friends.

"Yes," came the rather feeble answers.

"I move that Lem Gordon be made captain," called Fred Jenkins, evidently in furtherance of the plot Sandy had laid to oust Bart.

"Second it," came from Peter Rand.

“Look here!” exclaimed Bart, and his friends noticed he was pale. “Why didn’t you come to me like a man, Sandy Merton, and tell me their was opposition? I’d have resigned in a minute. But this is a sneaky way of doing things and I’ll fight it, do you understand? I’ll resign if the majority says I ought to but not before. Now go ahead and hold your election!”

“Hurrah for Bart!” called some one and there was a loud shout.

“Order!” vainly called Sandy.

“We don’t want an election!” sang out another boy. “Bart is the best captain we ever had! Didn’t we lick the Preps?”

“That’s right!” yelled a number. “Bart for captain!”

“Let them have the election!” cried Bart. “I’m not afraid. I know what it’s all about. It’s because I didn’t let Sandy pitch that game. And what’s more,” he added, “I believe he deliberately put Lem out of business so he might have a chance!”

“That’s a falsehood!” cried Sandy, making a spring toward Bart.

“Ask Lem,” was Bart’s reply. “If you want to fight, Sandy Merton, come on!”

“Don’t talk that way,” counseled Ned. “Let’s see if we can’t settle this thing peaceably.”

“Go on with the election!” called Bart, who was getting excited. “I’m not afraid! I’ll resign if you want me to!”

“We don’t want you to!” cried a score of voices.

“All those in favor of Lem Gordon for captain say ‘aye,’ ” called Sandy.

“I won’t take it!” shouted Lem. “Bart’s the captain for me.”

“That’s right!” yelled a dozen voices.

“All those who want Bart to continue captain say so!” cried Ned.

“Yes!” and the shout made the windows rattle.

“That settles it. Election’s over,” declared Ned.

“I say it isn’t!” yelled Sandy. “The rules provide for ballots.”

“This is good enough for us,” came from a number of boys, as they crowded around Bart to shake hands. “Bart’s the captain!”

“That was a mean, sneaking plot!” declared Ned. “Sandy thought he could work up enough sentiment against Bart to get a candidate of his

own in and get back on the team. But he failed.”

“You bet he did!” exclaimed Fenn. “Come on, fellows. It’s all over.”

Most of the boys began leaving the court. Sandy, the picture of disappointed rage, stood in a group of his friends.

“Thanks to all who voted for me,” called Bart, as he made his way out past where Sandy stood.

“I’ll get even with you!” growled Sandy. “You think you’re the Czar of the school!”

“If you —” began Bart hotly, but Ned spoke:

“Don’t pay any attention to him. You’ll only get into trouble. It’s all over. It was only a trick of Sandy’s. He hasn’t ten friends in the whole school.”

CHAPTER X

A COW IN SCHOOL

THE boys thronged from the court and out on the campus. There was a buzz of talk about what had taken place and Sandy came in for a severe "raking over the coals."

"What did you mean by saying he hurt Lem on purpose?" asked Newton Bantry, a member of the nine.

"You ask Sandy and maybe he'll tell you," replied Bart. "I'm sorry I said it, and I won't refer to it again. I may have been mistaken."

"I guess Sandy won't give us much chance to ask him anything," said Newton.

"Why?"

"Because he's going to leave school. I just heard him telling some of his cronies, those who were in the game with him. He says it's almost the end of the term, and he's going to work."

"Well it's small loss," put in Ned. "Though he's a good ball player when he wants to take the

pains. The trouble is he's too fond of playing tricks."

There was no further dissension in the nine, and under Bart's leadership it won several more games. The "Preps." challenged the boys again, but, though the high school boys did their best, they could not win. They were beaten by one run, but that was regarded as a great achievement against the redoubtable nine of older lads, and almost equivalent to a victory.

The weeks passed, and the end of the school term came nearer. Examinations were the order of the day, and the chums had little time to go off on trips along the river save on Saturdays. They made several excursions into the woods, and kept a lookout for the two queer men, but did not see them.

One day Ned went off alone in a search for the hut with the strange inscription. But he could not find it. Either he could not locate the place where he had seen it or the cabin had been moved.

"I'd like to get at the bottom of this," he murmured, as he tramped back home. "There's a method in the madness of those men, I'm sure."

But, if there was, Ned little dreamed what it portended.

“To-morrow’s the last day of school this term,” remarked Fenn, one afternoon as he and his chums strolled home. “My, but I’m glad of it! Those exams., especially the algebra, nearly floored me. Lucky there’s no more.”

“Never mind,” said Bart. “Forget it. We’ll have a lot of sport to-morrow. We can cut up a bit and the teachers won’t mind.”

“That’s so,” spoke Ned. “I’ve got to do something. I can feel it in my bones! Whoop! It must be something worthy of the Darewell Chums!” He began to do an impromptu war dance.

“Don’t get us into trouble,” came from Frank.

“Trouble? Did I ever get you into trouble?”

“Oh, no,” replied Bart sarcastically. “There wasn’t any trouble when you put the live frogs in Miss Mapes’s desk and scared her and all the other women teachers nearly into fits. There wasn’t any trouble when you let a lot of mice loose in the girls’ department. There wasn’t any trouble when you brought Jimmy Dodger’s pet coon in and yelled that it was a skunk. We didn’t get blamed for it all, did we? Oh, no, I guess not. Say, Ned, if you’re going to cut up, send in an advance notice that it’s your own doings and none of ours.”

“All right,” responded Ned. “If I get up the scheme myself I’ll take all the credit.”

“You’re welcome to it,” spoke Frank. “The credit — and what comes after.”

“Are you going to do anything?” asked Bart.

“Witness is not prepared to answer,” was Ned’s reply. “I may and I may not.”

If Ned’s chums could have seen him an hour later, talking to a farmer who lived about a mile outside of the town, they would have had grave suspicions regarding what he proposed to do to make the last day of school memorable.

The morning session of the last day passed off quietly enough. There was not much done in the way of lessons. Some students arranged with their teachers to do some studying during vacation to make up “conditions,” and others were consulting with the instructors about the work for next term.

Professor McCloud announced that the closing exercises would be held in the afternoon, the boys and girls assembling in the large auditorium on the second floor.

“I don’t see that you’re going to make good about that trick of yours,” observed Fenn to Ned at the noon recess.

“Who said I was going to play any trick?”

“Why I thought —”

“The day isn't over yet,” said Ned, with a wink.

At one o'clock the boys and girls gathered in the large hall. Ned's chums noticed he was not on hand, and they looked wonderingly at each other. There was no telling when or where Ned would break out.

A program of vocal and instrumental music was rendered and then came several recitations. It was while Jennie Smith was in the midst of a dramatic rendering of a poem telling of a maiden waiting and listening for the approach of her lover. She reached the lines:

“I feel his presence near me in the mystic mid-
night air

I hear his footsteps coming, coming up the
castle stair —”

At that moment there were, unmistakably, footsteps on the stair, only they were the stairs leading up from the court and not into a castle. Heavy footsteps they were, not at all lover-like. Up and up they came, sounding like several men with heavy boots on. Jennie paused, as she stood on the platform, and listened. The steps came nearer.

An instant later the door, which was not closed tightly, was pushed open, and into the big auditorium, in front of the pupils ambled a gentle-eyed cow, that, giving one astonished look around, uttered a loud "Moo!"

CHAPTER XI

HONORING THE SENIORS

“OH!” screamed Jennie, as she made a rush from the platform and fell in a faint just as Alice Keene caught her.

“Oh!” cried several women teachers.

Professor McCloud and a number of the men instructors dashed for the animal, but it lowered its horns and shook its head in a way that made them hesitate.

“Take it away!”

“Let me hide!”

“Save me!”

Various girls were thus crying in different parts of the room.

“Come on, boys! Let’s get her out!” cried Bart as he advanced toward the cow. As he did so Mr. Kenton, the language teacher, came down from the platform and advanced upon the animal. He was very near sighted and a trifle deaf.

“What has happened?” he asked of Mr. Long. “Is it some visitor whom the pupils are cheering?”

I would like to meet him. He seems to be a great favorite."

"It's a cow," Mr. Long said, beginning to laugh as he appreciated the joke. But Mr. Kenton had passed on unheeding and was right in front of the animal. He imagined the exercises had been interrupted by the entrance of some instructor from a neighboring institution, as they frequently attended on the closing day of the high school. Then Mr. Kenton, peering through his glasses saw what the intruder was.

"Why, it's a cow!" he exclaimed in such an accent of strange surprise that the boys, girls and teachers burst into a roar of laughter. This effectually disposed of the fright, and the girls calmed down.

In the meanwhile several boys had surrounded the cow that had advanced into the room. Professor McCloud had hurried into his office for a long ruler. Several of the men teachers were looking for ropes, while others were calling down speaking tubes in frantic tones for the janitor.

Most of the women teachers had fled to a small room to the right of the platform, and a number of girls had hidden under the seats. Many of them, however, remained standing up to see what would happen.

“Come on, boys,” repeated Bart. “We’ll lead her out.”

At that moment a farmer appeared in the doorway behind the cow. He held a rope in one hand and a whip in the other. He seemed much surprised at the commotion on every side.

“I was waiting down in the yard for my cow,” he said, in a loud voice, “and when I heard this here racket I thought maybe the critter had broken loose. Has she caused you any trouble? Hadn’t ought to as she’s a very gentle, mild critter. Did the experiment succeed?”

“Experiment? What experiment?” inquired Professor McCloud indignantly. “Did you bring this cow here, sir?”

“Well I did, but I didn’t lead her upstairs. She followed a line of salt some one had sprinkled. She’s terrible fond of salt. All critters is.”

“What do you mean?” demanded the principal.

“Why I was visited by one of your teachers yesterday — at least he said he was a teacher — and he paid me five dollars for the hire of my cow for this afternoon. Said the faculty of the high school was going to experiment on her. Make her moo into one of them phonograph machines and then see if cows had a language of their own. Said

it was for the benefit of the human race. So I agreed to bring the critter here. I left her with the teacher who met me downstairs, and then I went off to git a drink of cider. When I come back the cow was gone and I heard a terrible racket. Then I see some one had sprinkled a line of salt from that court, where I left the critter, right up the stairs. Course I knowed then what had happened. Is the experiment over?"

"What teacher came to you?" asked the principal, trying not to smile.

"Why he gave me his card," and the farmer fumbled in his pocket. "Here it is. Mr. Bo Vine. Don't he teach here?"

"I'm afraid there has been a mistake," said Mr. McCloud. "We did not arrange for any experiment on a cow. I am sorry you had this trouble for nothing."

"Oh, I got paid for it," replied the farmer. "Maybe I made a mistake in the school."

"Perhaps," said the principal. "Can you induce your bovine quadruped to accompany you?"

"My what?" asked the farmer, looking about him in a puzzled manner.

"Your cow," translated the principal.

"Oh, you mean this critter. Sure, yes, she'll follow me. Come on, Bess," and he held out a

handful of salt, which the cow began to lick up greedily. Then the farmer retreated down the stairs, the animal slowly following.

"Sorry you couldn't do that experiment," Mr. Craft called out as he gave the cow more salt. "I'd liked to have heard that there phonograph machine. You see my critter's real tame. She often comes up to the back door, and once, when she was a calf she came into the kitchen. So I said, when that there young feller, Mr. Bo Vine, asked if the cow could walk up a short flight of stairs, that she could. And she done it too," he added proudly. "Well I'll bid you good day," and the farmer, who by this time had gotten the animal into the lower court placed a rope about the horns and led her away.

"So that's Ned's trick," said Bart softly to his chums. "Wouldn't wonder but what he'd be expelled for it."

"If he gets found out," put in Frank.

It was some time before the school quieted down. Jennie, under the ministrations of Alice, recovered from her fainting fit, and the prospective nurse began looking around for others whom she might practice on. But there were no more. The women teachers, and those girls who had hidden under desks returned to their seats.

“Young ladies and gentlemen,” began Professor McCloud, “this has been an unexpected —”

Then he happened to think of Mr. Kenton’s mistake, and he had to turn aside to cover a laugh.

“I think, under the circumstances, we will omit the rest of the program,” he added. “I will say nothing further about — about the cow. I think I understand how it happened, and, in view of the fact that it is the close of the term, we will overlook what otherwise we could not. The seniors will now come forward and receive their diplomas and the exercises will be at an end.”

The senior class advanced to the platform and stood in a semi-circle about it. Ned’s chums noticed that he had quietly entered the assembly hall by a rear door and taken his seat.

“You’re a lucky dog,” whispered Bart.

“Why?” asked Ned, in seeming surprise.

“Oh, just as if you didn’t know! I always believed you were very fond of milk.”

“Milk?”

“Yes, and cows.”

“Cows? Was there a cow here?” and Ned acted as though that was the first he had heard of it. “I was in the laboratory getting some chemicals for home experiments during vacation,” he added with a perfect look of innocence on his face.

"Yes, you were," and Bart smiled. "But never mind,—it was a peach of a joke. We'll soon be out now."

"Let's serenade the seniors," suggested Ned.

"How?" asked Frank, coming over to where the two chums were. Discipline had ended for the day, as the last of the diplomas had been presented without formality.

"Follow me. We've got to honor 'em somehow. It's the last we'll see of 'em."

As the seniors, bearing their precious diplomas, filed out, which was a signal for the rest of the pupils to follow, the four chums, led by Ned, went down a rear stairway. Ned took them into the now deserted lunch room and produced several comical false faces, some paper hats of odd design and a number of tin fifes.

"Get some of the other fellows," Ned said to Stumpy. "We must have enough for a band."

About ten other lads came, in answer to Fenn's quick summons, and were soon arrayed in the masks and caps, while their coats, turned wrong side out, added to their fantastic appearances.

"All ready!" called Ned, and then, every one playing a different tune on his fife, they marched out on the campus.

The seniors, in accordance with an old custom,

had gathered in a circle about an ancient elm tree and were singing. The song was "Farewell to Thee, Dear Alma Mater," and they were in the midst of the touching lines:

"We shall be here never more;
Some go to a foreign shore,"

"Toot! Toot!" sounded shrilly on the fifes and then the band of masqueraders, followed by scores of other boys and girls, began circling the seniors.

The farewell song was drowned in a burst of weird noises, tootings, yells and shouts.

"Farewell to the seniors!" called Ned.

"Farewell!" echoed the crowd.

"Here we go 'round the mulberry bush, the mulberry bush, the mulberry bush!" sang Bart.
"All join hands!"

Then began a mad, merry dance. The seniors looked on helplessly. Some of them were laughing, and some of the girls were crying just a little bit, at the thought of leaving all their happy comrades.

"Farewell, farewell, farewell!" the other pupils sang, as they ran around in a circle, hands joined to hands.

“Now give ’em ‘How Can I Bear to Leave Thee,’ ” suggested Ned, and the pupils quieted down and sang the song with feeling.

Then the circle broke up, and the seniors, waving their diplomas, and trying to say good-bye to scores at once, broke away from the old oak tree and started home — high school pupils no longer. But there were plenty left.

CHAPTER XII

FRANK'S QUEER LETTER

“WHAT are we going to do this vacation?” asked Ned of his three chums, as they assembled the next Monday morning at the boat dock where they had agreed to meet.

“We had such a strenuous time Friday I haven't been able to think of anything since,” said Frank. “Say that was the best last day yet, thanks to you, Ned.”

“That cow was the limit,” spoke Bart. “How did you happen to think of it?”

“Oh, it sort of came to me.”

“And the cow ‘sort of’ came up stairs,” cried Fenn. “Say, it was as good as a circus.”

“How did you do it?” asked Bart.

“It was easy enough once I got the farmer to consent. I met him down in the yard and laid the salt trail after he left. The cow did the rest.”

“Let's go for a swim,” proposed Bart. “It's getting hot, and the water ought to be fine. Come on up to the old hole.”

The idea pleased the others. They got their suits from the dock house where they kept them, and soon were in their boat rowing for the swimming hole, just below the Riffles.

"Wonder if we'll see the King of Paprica?" said Bart.

"They needn't worry; we'll not bother 'em,"

"How do you know?" asked Frank quickly.

"Well I passed the place where the hut was the other day, and it was gone."

"They may have moved it to another place because they didn't want us to know where it was," suggested Fenn.

"They needn't worry, we'll not bother 'em," said Bart. "It's too hot to tramp through the woods to-day."

The boys rowed leisurely up the stream, keeping close in shore, where there was plenty of shade. At one place they could send the craft along under an arch of overhanging bushes which made a sort of bower.

They had scarcely entered this spot, which was about half a mile below the swimming hole, when there sounded a cracking in the woods that told them some one was walking along the shore.

"Wait a bit," suggested Ned. "Let's see if it's any of the fellows."

Bart and Fenn, who were rowing, rested on their oars, and all four boys listened. The noise came nearer. Suddenly there peered forth from the bushes a man who had every appearance of being a tramp.

His face had not felt a razor for several weeks. His coat was in tatters, and his trousers, into which was tucked a ragged blue shirt, were all frayed about the bottoms, and flapped like those on a scarecrow. His hat was a battered derby and on one foot he wore a boot, while the other was encased in a heavy shoe. He looked at the boys for several seconds.

"Hello," he said at length, in a pleasant voice that contrasted strangely with his disreputable appearance. "Are you boys acquainted around here?"

"Pretty well," replied Fenn.

"Well, you haven't seen a short stout man, with a black moustache and black hair, anywhere around here, have you?"

"Did he have a gilt crown on?" asked Ned quickly.

"A gilt crown? No. Why should he wear a gilt crown?" and the tramp affected surprise.

"Oh, nothing, I was just wondering, that's all," and Ned winked at the other boys.

"I guess you can't tell me what I want to know," the tramp resumed. "I'm much obliged though. About how far is it to the lake?"

"Twelve miles from here," replied Bart.

"Well, I guess I can make it by night," the man said, and then he drew back into the bushes and the boys could hear him tramping through the woods.

"What made you ask him about the gilt crown?" inquired Frank.

"Because he partly described the man we saw at the hut that day," replied Ned, "and I thought I might as well complete it. I guess he's here to add to the mystery. It's getting deeper. We must certainly solve it; or try to, at any rate."

"You'd make a mystery out of a fish jumping for a fly," said Frank. "Let up on it."

"Whew! But it's hot!" exclaimed Bart, as the boat was sent on, coming from the shady nook into the glare of the sun. "I'm going to stay in all morning."

They were soon at the swimming hole, and lost little time in getting into the water. Its coolness was a welcome relief from the heat and they splashed about in great glee.

The boys were making such a noise, laughing and yelling that they did not hear the hail of a

youth who came down to the edge of the bank, a little later, and shouted at them. Finally, however, he managed to make his presence known by a shrill whistle in imitation of a whip-poor-will.

“Why it’s John Newton!” exclaimed Fenn, recognizing the boy who had been expelled from school.

“I’ve got a letter for you, Frank,” said John.

“A letter for me?”

“Yes. Special delivery.”

“Where’d you get it?”

“From the post-office of course. I’m working there now as messenger. Heard you boys were here and as I had to come in this direction I brought it along.”

“Thought you were going to get a job in a theater,” remarked Bart.

“I am, some day, but I’ve got to go to New York for a good opening. There’s none around here for a real artist,” and John began to warble like a bob-o-link.

“Wonder who that letter’s from?” asked Frank.

“Better wade ashore and find out,” suggested Ned, and Frank did so.

His chums watched him take the letter from John and sign the book and then they too, be-

gan making their way toward shore. Frank dried his hands on his shirt, which was on top of his pile of clothes on the bank, and opened the envelope.

The letter must have been a short one, for he was only a few seconds in reading it. As he did so his chums could see a change come over his face.

“Bad news?” asked Bart sympathetically.

“No — yes — that is — I can't tell you,” said Frank, speaking quickly. “I've got to hurry back home,” he added. “I'll go on if you don't mind, and not wait for you,” and he began to dress quickly.

“Aren't you going back in the boat?” asked Ned.

“No, I think I'll walk through the woods. I'll take the short cut.”

“Anythink we can do?” asked Bart.

“No — I wish I could tell you — but I can't,” Frank replied. “I must send an answer at once.”

He thrust the letter into his trousers pocket and went on dressing himself. He completed his toilet in a hurry and walked off through the woods, taking the path the post-office messenger had used. The latter had departed as soon as he delivered the missive.

“Well, that's a strange sort of letter Frank

got," commented Bart as he climbed out on the bank. "Hello!" he added. "He's forgotten the envelope," and he picked it up from the ground where Frank had dropped it.

CHAPTER XIII

SANDY ON GUARD

“HURRY after him,” suggested Ned

“He’s too far by this time,” spoke Bart. “Besides I don’t fancy going through the woods in my bare feet. I guess it will keep.”

“Where’s it from?” asked Fenn. There seemed to be nothing wrong in looking at the post-mark. Besides the chums seldom had secrets from each other.

“New York,” said Bart, turning the envelope over. “It is from a law firm,” he added as he looked at the name in the upper left hand corner. “Wright & Johnson, 11 Pine street.”

“I’ve got some relatives in New York,” remarked Ned. “I am going to see ’em some day.”

“Well, I don’t see how that will throw any light on Frank’s queer actions,” remarked Fenn. “Wonder what the trouble is?”

“If he doesn’t want to tell us I don’t see what right we’ve got to ask,” came from Ned. “Better not say anything more to him about it.”

“We’ll give him back the envelope,” suggested

Bart, "and that will give him an opening if he wants to tell us anything. If he doesn't — why I guess it's his secret."

That was decided to be the best move, and the boys dressed and got into the boat. They rowed leisurely back to the dock, speculating, at intervals, over Frank's curious behavior.

"Maybe he'll go to New York," suggested Ned.

"He's not likely to go without telling us," came from Bart. "If he does he'll see us before he goes."

The lads remained at the dock some little time, cleaning their boat and mending a broken oar. As they were walking up the street toward the main part of town Ned exclaimed:

"There goes Frank now!"

The others looked and saw their chum just ahead of them, hurrying along.

"Where's he going?" asked Bart.

A moment later they saw Frank enter the law office of Judge Benton.

"He seems to have quite some legal business," observed Fenn. "Maybe some one has left him a lot of money."

"Wish some one would leave me a bit," observed Ned with a laugh.

Further consideration of Frank's doings was interrupted for a moment as the chums met Lem Gordon.

"Hello Lem, where you going?" asked Ned.

"Got to go to the hardware store for some nails. Lot of jobs to do around the house and dad says I might as well keep busy during vacation. I planned to go fishing, too, but I guess I can do that this afternoon. Say, did you hear about Sandy?"

"No, what's he done now."

"Gone off camping in the woods, somewhere up along the river."

"Any one with him?" asked Bart.

"No, all alone. Hired a tent that Sid Edwards used last year and went off by himself."

"I thought he was afraid to stay out alone nights," observed Stumpy.

There's something strange about it," went on Lem. "Tom Jasper, who lives next door, told me he saw a strange man talking to Sandy in the back yard one day. The next day Sandy arranged to go camping."

"What sort of a looking man was he?" asked Bart.

"All I remember is that he had a very black moustache."

The three chums looked at one another. The same thought was in the mind of each, that the man might be the one who had called himself King of Paprica.

"I'd like to go camping myself," Lem went on. "What you fellows going to do this vacation?"

"Haven't made up our minds yet," replied Ned. "We'll have some fun, though."

"Where's Frank?" inquired Lem. "Seems funny not to see the four of you together."

"He'll be along pretty soon," said Bart. "We were up to the swimming hole, and he had some business to attend to, so he came back ahead of us."

"Well I'm going after those nails," the pitcher went on. "The fence will fall down before I get back if I don't hurry. It's been threatening to topple for a week," and he went on, whistling a merry tune.

"That's funny about Sandy," remarked Ned, when Lem was out of earshot.

"And about that black-moustached man," went on Bart. "We'll have to look into this. Hello, here comes Frank."

Their chum emerged from Judge Benton's place with a letter in his hand and hurried to the post-office, nearly across the street from the lawyer's

office. He remained inside only a few seconds, and evidently posted the missive for, when he came out, his hands were empty. Then he saw his chums and hurried over toward them.

“Sorry I had to run away,” Frank said, with a little bit of awkwardness in his air, “but I had to attend to some business in a hurry.”

“There’s the envelope you dropped,” said Bart. “We found it when we came out to dress.”

“Thanks,” replied Frank, and, without looking at it he put it into his pocket. “Say,” he went on, “what do you say to taking a walk after some wild flowers this afternoon?”

“Wild flowers; what for?” inquired Ned.

“Well, not for ourselves, of course,” Frank went on. “I happened to meet Miss Mapes, the teacher you know, and she asked me if I knew where there were any. There’s going to be an entertainment in her church and they want some to decorate with. I told her I thought I could get her plenty. Do you want to go?”

“Sure,” replied Bart, and the others nodded assent. Miss Mapes, was a favorite with all the pupils.

“We’ll meet at the dock, right after dinner,” proposed Frank, “row up the river a way and then strike in through the woods. Right at the foot

of Bender's Hill ought to be a good place. The woods are thick and shady there."

The others agreed to this and separated, to gather again about one o'clock.

"Stumpy, you and Bart row," suggested Ned. "You need the exercise to keep you from getting fat, and Bart wants to keep in training for football next term."

"Well, I like your nerve, Ned Wilding!" exclaimed Fenn.

"Same here!" came from Bart.

"I thought you would," observed Ned coolly, as he went to the stern, prepared to steer.

"He and I will row back," suggested Frank.

"That's right,—take the easiest part—come down with the current," growled Stumpy, but he took his place at the oars. Perhaps he thought he was getting too stout.

Bart grumbled some, but in a good-natured way, and ended by taking his place just ahead of Fenn, while Frank went to the bow, and soon they were underway.

They tied their boat in a secluded place about a mile above the Riffles and then struck off through the woods. It was two miles to Bender's Hill, a small mountain named after the man on whose property it was located, and it was the highest

point in the vicinity. All about it, as well as on the sides and top of the hill, were dense woods, not often visited.

After some hard tramping through underbrush and over fallen trees, which the boys did not seem to mind (though they would have growled if they had been obliged to do it) they came to a little clearing. They were about to cross it when there came a sudden hail:

“ You fellows can't come here! ”

“ I'd like to know why? ” inquired Bart without seeing who had spoken.

“ Because I'm here on guard to see that no one passes,” and at that the boys glanced up, to see Sandy Merton, with a little target rifle in his hands, standing on the other edge of the clearing.

CHAPTER XIV

PECULIAR OPERATIONS

FOR a few seconds the boys were too surprised to make any answer. They saw that Sandy was standing in front of a tent, partly hidden by the woods.

“What are you talking about?” demanded Bart. “Are you playing soldier, Sandy?”

“You’ll see what I’m playing fast enough,” spoke the former member of the baseball nine. “I tell you not to come across here.”

“Why not?” asked Fenn.

“Because I say so.”

“That’s no reason.”

“I’ll make it one. Don’t you fellows get fresh with me. You think because you can run the high school, and the nine, you can boss me but I’ll show you that you can’t.”

“No one want’s to boss you,” spoke Ned. “You’re making a big fool of yourself, Sandy.”

“I am, eh? Well, that’s my affair. I tell you to keep away from here.”

“But why?” insisted Bart. “This — well, of course it isn’t public property, though no one has ever been stopped from coming here after flowers.”

“Some one’s going to be stopped now,” and Sandy grinned as he looked at his rifle, and then back at his tent.

“We’ve got as much right here as you have,” went on Ned.

“No, you haven’t.”

“I say we have. Mr. Bender’s no relation of yours.”

“I didn’t say he was.”

“But you act so,” said Bart, “standing guard on his property.”

“I may be standing guard, but I’m not working for Mr. Bender,” Sandy answered. “I tell you that you can’t go past, and you’d better not try it. I’ve got a right for what I say, and you’ll find out if you try to cross.”

“Do you mean to say you’d shoot us?” asked Frank suddenly.

“Well — er — I — You haven’t any right here and I order you off!” exclaimed Sandy, getting rather tangled up.

“You can’t order me off!” exclaimed Frank. “I’m going to cross this clearing. If you point that gun at me, Sandy Merton, I’ll lick you so

hard you can't stand up for a week," and he started forward.

"Don't get rash," counseled Bart in a low voice. "No use looking for trouble. We'll let the mean little cub alone. I guess there are flowers somewhere else."

"But he hasn't any right to make us keep off," complained Frank. "I s'pose he's got permission from Bender to camp here and he thinks he owns the place. I'll show him he doesn't. I'll whip him!"

Frank again started forward, but Ned took hold of his arm.

"Don't do it," he urged. "Sandy might not mean to, but the gun might go off by accident, and it isn't worth the trouble. I guess we —"

Ned's remarks were interrupted by the sight of a man, who suddenly appeared from the bushes back of Sandy and stood beside the boy. His first move was to grab the gun away from the youth and then he called out:

"I'm sorry to have to ask you young gentlemen to withdraw, but this is private property and you are trespassing. Will you kindly go?"

"There never was any rule against going through here before," said Bart in respectful tones.

"That may be," the man answered, "but it is different now. I am acting for Mr. Bender."

"Of course we haven't any right here," observed Frank, "and we'll go if you say we must. But it made us mad to have that little sneak Sandy order us off."

"I'm not a sneak, and I'll punch your face for saying so!" cried Sandy.

"Come on over, you'll have all the chance you want," fired back Frank.

"That will do," said the man coolly. "Perhaps Sandy was a little hasty, but what he said was true. He has been hired to watch this property, but I don't believe he needs a gun. I did not tell him to use one."

"I had to protect myself," whined Sandy.

"Ho! Don't worry! You're too mean for us to bother with!" exclaimed Ned. "We'll go," he added.

"I wish you would," the man replied, civilly enough. "I have no objection to your walking all around within a mile of here, but within that space the land is prescribed," and he smiled in no unfriendly fashion. "I will bid you good day. Sandy, I guess you can come with me; they will go," and the man moved back into the woods

whence he had come, carrying Sandy's rifle, and followed by that youth, who paused to shake his fist at the chums.

"Well, did you ever hear the beat of that?" asked Ned, as he and the others turned around and walked back. "So this is where Sandy is camping. I wonder what it all means?"

"It means there is something queer going on, and I'm going to see what it is," declared Bart. "Come on, I'll show them a trick."

"What are you going to do?" asked Ned.

"We'll go up on top of the hill. I know a place where we can look right down into this clearing and all around it. It's from a tall tree I climbed once when I was after bird's eggs."

"But we can't see so far," objected Frank.

"I've got something that we can take a peep with," replied Bart, and he pulled out a small telescope. "I saw that advertised in a magazine and I sent for it," he explained. "It came this noon when I was home to dinner, and I forgot to show it to you. You can see five miles off quite plainly through it."

"That's all to the good!" exclaimed Stumpy.

"What beats me," put in Frank, "is how that man came to hire Sandy, and why they're so afraid

of being seen, or of having any one on that particular land?"

"Maybe we'll find out pretty soon," spoke Bart.

"I thought Lem said it was a man with a black moustache who was talking to Sandy that day," said Frank. "This fellow has a light beard."

"Might be another man, or this one might be disguised," spoke Fenn.

"It's getting just like a story in a book," remarked Ned. "All it needs is the King of Paprica now to complete it."

"Perhaps they're all in this game," suggested Bart.

"The plot thickens, as they say on the stage," remarked Frank. "Come on, we'll have to make better time than this. Wonder if Miss Mapes will get her wild flowers?"

"There are plenty on top of the hill," observed Fenn. "It's a hard climb, that's all."

"There's some sort of a path around here," Bart said. "It leads to the top, and was used by some lumbermen. I used to take it. Seems to me — yes, here it is," he added as he burst through a particularly thick patch of brush, and came out on a rude wagon trail. "Now it will be easier going."

It took about an hour to reach the top of the

hill, and they were so tired they sat down for a moment to rest. They could get a good view of the surrounding country from their vantage point, and, for a while, tried the telescope in various directions. As Bart had said, it was a good instrument and showed things very clearly.

“Now for a look at our friend Sandy’s camp,” observed Bart as he went to the tree from which he had said he could look down into the clearing. It was his privilege to take the first peep, and when he had climbed half way up and adjusted the glass he focussed it on the place from which the boys had recently been ordered away.

For a few seconds Bart remained motionless, gazing at something below him. His companions waited anxiously for some report.

“See anything?” asked Frank.

“No, don’t appear to be anyone — hold on though! Yes, there is. I see three men.”

“What are they doing?”

“They seem to be walking about.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes, that’s all — No, by Jimminy! It can’t be possible! They’re playing leap-frog!”

“Playing leap-frog!” exclaimed Ned.

“Yes! Jumping about like boys! Here, you

come up and take a look, Frank! You've got the best eyesight of any of us."

Bart descended and Frank took his place. He gazed through the telescope for several seconds.

"The men are certainly jumping about," he said, "but they're not playing leap-frog."

"What are they doing?" asked Bart.

"They're hurrying from one place to another, looking at something through big magnifying glasses, just like that man in the boat. That's who they are. I can see the King of Paprica!"

"Let me have a look!" cried Ned.

"Is Sandy there?" asked Bart.

"I don't see him. Yes, there he is. He's helping them, from the look of things!"

In turn Ned and Fenn were allowed to gaze through the telescope. They confirmed what Frank had said, that the men were certainly at some peculiar operations.

"There are some more tents back of Sandy's," said Stumpy. "And I can see a log hut, too. There's something red over the door!"

CHAPTER XV

NED STOPS A PANIC

“CAN you read it?” asked Ned.

“It begins with a ‘K.’ ‘King of Paprica,’ that’s what it is. I can see it plainly, now that the sun is out from behind the cloud.”

“This is where they moved the hut to,” Ned went on. “Well, this thing is getting more and more mysterious.”

Bart again ascended the tree and took a long observation. He reported that the men seemed to be measuring the land with long chains, while one was using an instrument such as surveyors carry.

“Maybe they’re planning to put a new trolley line through,” suggested Fenn.

“That’s so,” agreed Bart. “I didn’t think of that.”

“Probably don’t want folks to know which way it’s going, as if they did, they might put up the price of land.”

“But that doesn’t explain the queer actions of the crazy men,” objected Ned. “I bet there’s something more than that in all this.”

“Well, I don’t see as we can do anything,” spoke Frank cautiously. “We haven’t any right to go on private land. Guess we’ll have to let it drop.”

“Wonder how they came to hire Sandy?” said Bart.

“Probably they knew he was so unpopular he wouldn’t say much to the other fellows,” explained Ned.

“Anyhow we’ve seen what we wanted to, though we can’t make head or tail of it,” came from Fenn. “Let’s go on after the flowers.”

“The men are going away now,” Bart reported. “They’ve gone back in the woods, and Sandy is there on guard again. He needn’t worry, we’ll not bother him.”

The boys remained on top of the hill some little while longer and then, finding a place where there were a number of beautiful wild flowers, gathered large bunches, wrapping the stems about with leaves, wet in a spring, to keep the flowers fresh.

They went through the woods so as to skirt the edge of the clearing but not near enough to it to be seen by Sandy, as they did not wish to get into a quarrel with the youth.

“Let’s make some inquiries when we get back

to town," suggested Bart, "and see if anyone has heard of a trolley line being extended, or of any surveyors at work."

"Whom can we ask?" inquired Ned.

"You ask Judge Benton, Frank," said Bart. "You know him, don't you?"

"Yes," was the answer, and Frank looked at Bart sharply, as if to see whether the suggestion was made with any particular motive. In fact Bart had mentioned the lawyer's name to see if Frank would volunteer anything about his visit to the judge's office that day. But Frank said nothing.

Rowing back was easy work, with the stream's current to help the boat along, and, early that afternoon, the boys tied up at the dock.

They took the flowers to the church, in the lecture room of which the entertainment was to be held. Miss Mapes met the boys there.

"This is very kind of you," she said, as she took the blossoms. They will make the place look beautifully. I hope you didn't have much trouble."

"Not a bit," Frank assured her.

"I'm sure you ought to be rewarded in some way," the teacher went on.

"We didn't do it for pay," said Fenn.

“Of course, I know that,” responded Miss Mapes, “but I would like to show you how much I appreciate it. Won’t you come to the entertainment to-night?” and she held out some tickets.

The boys’ faces showed how glad they would be to come. There was to be music, singing and tableaux, and, while the lads had money enough to buy tickets, they were glad as are most persons to get complimentary ones.

“Are you sure you can spare them?” asked Bart.

“Why I am only too glad to give them to you,” Miss Mapes said. “I’m sure you boys deserve them if any one does. All the members of the arrangement committee get free tickets, and I appoint you special members of the flower committee,” she ended, with a laugh.

The entertainment was much enjoyed. There was good music and a number of popular songs were rendered. The affair was to close with a series of tableaux in which several young persons were to pose as famous characters. Considerable time and work had been put into this feature and everyone was anxious to see it.

Lincoln delivering one of his speeches, Washington reading his farewell address, and Pocahon-

tas saving the life of Captain John Smith, were given with much success. The last one was to be a patriotic group, called the "Spirit of '76," which is often shown in pictures, the three figures, an old man and two younger ones, playing martial music on drum and fife while all about them rolls the smoke of battle.

To give the proper effect it was planned to burn a quantity of red fire back of the group to represent the mist of smoke caused by the guns, while the explosion of cannon was to be simulated.

As the curtain went up on the group there was a burst of applause when the tableaux came into view, for it was a surprise, and not down on the program. The red fire was touched off and a great cloud of smoke, made lurid by the chemicals, rolled out. Then the curtain stopped, with but half the figures in view.

"Higher! Higher!" called some one in the wings of the improvised stage. "Higher!"

The voice was loud enough to be heard out in the audience, but was intended to be audible only to the person in charge of pulling up the curtain.

It was an unfortunate thing that "Higher" sounded so much like "Fire!" In fact that is what a number of persons thought the cry was, and, taking it with the smoke, which few knew

was a part of the picture, they believed some accident had happened.

“Higher! Higher!” called the stage manager again, not seeing the alarmed look on the faces of the audience. He wanted the curtain to go up, but it was caught on something.

Then the panic-wave, which is always ready to sweep over a big gathering at the slightest provocation, started. A few women screamed. Some girls started to leave their seats and a number of boys made ready to follow.

“It’s a fire!” yelled some thoughtless one.

That was enough. In an instant the entire audience had arisen and was about to make a maddened rush for the exits, of which there were none too many.

The four chums, with their girl friends, were seated in the first row. They were near enough to know what the matter was and to see there was no danger. Others near them could also see, but the vast majority was in ignorance.

“If they rush for the doors a lot will be killed!” cried Bart.

“Sit down! Sit down!” yelled Frank, and Fenn joined with him in trying to calm those around him. Several girls near them had fainted.

"There's going to be trouble!" said Ned in a low tone to Fenn. "What can we do?"

"Tell the band to play!" cried Fenn.

Ned turned to where the orchestra had been seated, but the players had fled. The audience was rushing madly for the doors. They were crushing in a terror-stricken mass around the exits. Ned saw his opportunity and acted.

Grasping a cornet from the chair where the player had dropped it he began to blow. He had learned how to give the army bugle calls while in camp one year, and the memory came back to him. An instant later the sweet notes of "Taps," or "Lights out," sounded above the terrible noise of the frenzied throng. The audience halted in its mad rush.



GRASPING A CORNET FROM THE CHAIR WHERE THE PLAYER HAD DROPPED IT, HE BEGAN TO BLOW—Page 110

CHAPTER XVI

A RIVER TRIP

STANDING up on his seat Ned continued to blow the notes. Clear and true they rang out. Twice he gave the call, but before he had begun the second round the audience had calmed down. Ned had saved the day; the panic was practically over.

Here and there a frightened woman, a hysterical girl, or a timid man made a movement toward getting out, but the majority had come to a halt and turned to look at the young bugler.

By this time those in charge of the entertainment were on the stage calling reassuringly to the people. The red fire died out and the smoke drifted away.

“Take your seats,” said the manager, and nearly every one did so.

“There was an unfortunate mistake,” the manager went on. “Luckily no one was hurt. I regret very much that it has happened. I think it will be best to close the entertainment. It was almost over when the panic started.”

“I want to add but that for the presence of

mind of this young man," and he looked at Ned, who tried to hide down in his seat, "there might have been a terrible calamity. By his quickness he prevented the panic from continuing. He deserves the thanks of every one here."

"And he'll get 'em, too," called someone. "Three cheers for Ned Wilding!"

They were given with a fervor that made the chandeliers rattle.

"Good for you, old chap!" exclaimed Bart, clapping Ned on the back, while the other chums began shaking his hands. Ned was blushing like a girl, and was soon the center of an admiring throng. He tried to get away but they would not let him. Exery one wanted to shake hands with him.

The audience was now laughing and talking where, but a few minutes before, it had been a maddened, unreasoning throng; and shortly began dispersing, and soon there remained only a few, including those in charge of the entertainment. Miss Mapes was among them.

"I'm sure it was the luckiest think in the world that you boys came," she said to the chums. "What would have happened if Ned hadn't played that cornet?"

"Oh, anyone could have done that," said Ned,

who was wishing he could get away from the praise.

“Of course they could, if they had thought of it, but you were the only one who did.”

“I guess some of the other boys would, if I had given them the chance,” replied the hero of the occasion. “I happened to be nearest the instrument, that’s all.”

“Well, it’s a great deal,” responded the teacher. “I’ll send you boys tickets to every entertainment we have.”

“That will be fine,” put in Fenn with a laugh.

“I vote we go home,” said Bart. “Don’t seem to be any more panics to put down.”

The four chums, and the girls, left, each one trying to outdo the other in telling of what they thought and what they saw during the excitement. It was as near a tragedy as had ever happened in the town, and the next day’s paper devoted the whole front page to it, including a vivid description of what Ned had done.

“I’m going to leave town,” declared Ned the next afternoon, as he met his chums.

“What’s the matter?” asked Frank.

“Why everyone I meet on the street stops me and asks me all about it. I’m tired of telling of it and hearing about it.”

"You're not used to being a hero," said Bart. "Wait until some society sends you a medal and you'll be so proud you won't speak to any of us."

"Speaking of leaving town makes me think it would be a good plan," put in Fenn.

"What! Have you been robbing a bank or doing something else, that you want to skip out?" asked Bart.

"No, but we haven't had any real sport since school closed, and it's about time we did. I was going to propose taking a trip up the river say for about twenty miles, and camping out for a week. That would be fun."

"You're right!" exclaimed Ned. "I'll go with you for one."

"Count me in," said Bart, and Frank added that he wasn't going to be left behind.

"This is my plan," went on Fenn. "We can take a small shelter tent, some blankets and a camp cook stove. The boat is big enough to carry all that, besides us, and some things to eat. The weather is fine now, and just right for sleeping out of doors. We can row along slowly, stopping where ever we want to, and tying up along shore for the night. What do you say?"

"Couldn't be better," declared Ned. "When can we start?"

“To-morrow if you want to, as far as I’m concerned,” put in Bart.

“It will take a couple of days to get ready,” observed Fenn. “Suppose we say Thursday?”

This was agreed upon, and the boys separated to make arrangements for the trip. They owned, jointly, a small tent that could be used for shelter at night, and a small portable stove which they had utilized on previous camping trips.

Thursday morning saw the boat loaded until there was hardly room for the boys. The craft was heavy but they did not mind that, and there was no grumbling when it fell to the lot of Frank and Ned to do the rowing for the first stage.

“We’ll stop at Riverton on our way up and hire a canoe,” said Bart. “A fellow there has a dock and keeps good boats. We’ll want to do a little paddling about and we can’t, very well, if we have all our camp stuff in this heavy craft. We can tow the canoe behind us, and use it while we’re in camp.”

The others agreed that this would be a good plan, and Bart, having taken a final look over the boat to see that everything was in ship-shape, gave the order to start.

CHAPTER XVII

THE TRAMP'S HEADQUARTERS

FRANK and Ned began pulling with long steady strokes. The boat with its load was not easy to propel through the water and they knew they could do better by taking it easy than by wasting their strength in useless hurry.

Up the stream they went, past Darewell, under the bridge spanning the stream just above the dock, and so on beyond the outskirts of the town until they were out into the country district surrounding the place. It was a pleasant sunshiny day, just warm enough to be comfortable, and with a little breeze blowing.

"I wish this could go on forever," spoke Fenn, from where he was resting comfortably on the folded tent in the bow of the craft.

"Wait until it comes your turn to row," said Ned.

They reached Riverton, the next town above Darewell about eleven o'clock and hired the canoe, a large green one, but very light to paddle.

"Shall we get dinner here?" asked Bart.

"If we're going to camp let's camp from the start," suggested Fenn. "What's the fun of going to a restaurant for your meals? Anyone can do that, but it isn't everyone who can have theirs in the woods as we can. Let's go up a few miles more and get dinner on shore."

The others decided this would be the most fun, and the trip was resumed with Bart and Fenn at the oars. They made three miles before twelve o'clock and then, finding a shady, level spot near shore, tied the boat, and got out the portable stove.

"Now, Stumpy," said Bart, who had been elected camp manager, "you get the wood. Ned, you dig some worms and catch fish, and Frank and I will get the meal ready."

The little temporary camp was soon a busy place. Fenn had a fire going in the stove in short order as he found plenty of dry wood, and Ned, going up stream, to a quiet spot, in a little while had caught several fish. They were soon cleaned and put on to fry with the bacon. An appetizing odor filled the little glade in the woods and the boys began to sniff hungrily.

"When will they be done?" asked Frank, as Bart bent over the pan.

“About ten minutes. You can make the coffee if you want to. Ned, you open a can of condensed milk and Fenn, you get out the salt and pepper.”

“Everything but the salt,” announced Fenn a few moments later. “Here’s the box but there’s none in it.”

The others looked surprised and disappointed.

“By Jimminites: I forgot to put it in,” he added “I bought all the other things but I left the salt to the last and it slipped my mind.”

“That’s pleasant,” observed Bart grimly. “How are we going to eat fresh fish without salt? Fenn, you’re a dandy, you are. Thinking too much of the girls, that’s what ails you.”

“Anybody might forget,” said Stumpy in extenuation.

“Well, there’s no help for it, I suppose,” remarked Ned.

“Might use gunpowder,” put in Frank. “I’ve read of campers doing that.”

“Excuse me,” came from Bart, making a wry face. “Besides we haven’t any, so that doesn’t count.”

“There’s some one camping on the other side of the river,” said Fenn, pointing to where a little column of smoke arose through the trees, about

opposite to where the boys were located. "Maybe I could borrow some salt from there."

"Good idea," said Bart. "Take the canoe and paddle over."

Fenn was soon on his way. The others went on with the preparations for dinner pending his return, as the fish were not quite cooked. They watched Fenn paddle over, pull his canoe upon shore, and disappear into the woods. He was gone a few minutes and when he reappeared a man followed him.

"Maybe he wouldn't lend any salt," said Frank.

As the boys watched they saw the man get into the canoe with Fenn, who then paddled over.

"Looks as though he wouldn't trust Stumpy to bring the salt over," commented Bart. "Wonder what the man wants?"

In a short time the canoe containing Fenn and the stranger grounded on the little beach near where the boys were camped.

"Did you get the salt?" asked Ned.

"Yes, we have the salt," replied the man, and then the three boys noticed with surprise he was the same tramp they had met the day they went swimming, and who had inquired about the man the boys knew as the King of Paprica.

"This is the gentleman who was camping on

the other side of the river," put in Fenn. "I asked him for some salt and —"

"Allow me to explain," interrupted the tramp, but in a polite tone. "You see it was this way. I am prospecting along the river, and last night my boat, with all my camping outfit, was upset. My food got all wet, and the only thing that didn't get soaked was the box of salt. It happened to be waterproof.

"I was drying out my clothes and other camping things but alas, when I came to dry out the food I found it had spoiled. So there I was, with nothing but salt to eat. I was just thinking of trying for some fish when this young gentleman came along and asked if he could borrow some salt. I at once saw my opportunity. 'Here,' I said, 'are persons with plenty to eat and no salt. Here I am with plenty of salt but nothing to eat. A fair exchange is no robbery.' I at once produced my salt."

"And I at once asked him over to dinner," put in Fenn.

"Why, of course; glad to have you," said Bart. "Frank, put another plate on," he added waving his hand to the ground which served as a table. "Dinner is served," and he laughed, the tramp joining him.

"Happy to meet you all," the ragged man went on, not considering it necessary, it seemed, to mention his name or ask how the boys were called. "There is the salt," and he handed over a large box full.

In spite of his ragged clothes and the heavy growth of beard on his face, the tramp's hands and face were clean and he appeared to have washed his clothes, as, though they were in tatters, they were not dirty.

"Do you intend to camp around here long?" asked Frank.

"I can't tell," replied the tramp. "I am waiting for some friends to join me."

He did not seem to recognize the boys as the ones he had met in the woods recently, or, if he did, he gave no sign of it.

"You said you were prospecting," Ned added. "Not for gold, are you?"

"Hardly," replied the ragged man with a smile. "The truth is I am a naturalist. I have heard there is a certain rare kind of butterfly to be found along this river and I am looking for it. It is called the Oiliander Tinicander. Perhaps you have seen it in your travels."

"Guess we wouldn't know it if we saw it," remarked Ned.

“No, it takes years of study to recognize it. But if you will excuse me I think I will sit down.”

He crossed his legs comfortably in front of the plate that had been placed for him, and in a few minutes the dinner was under way. The salt certainly added zest to the fried fish and the boys, as well as the tramp, ate with excellent appetites.

“Best meal I’ve had in a long while,” said the ragged man. “I hope I can return the favor some time.”

“We’ll be happy to call on you,” said Bart, “but we are going to leave this afternoon. We are bound up the river.”

“Well, good luck to you. May I trouble you to put me on the other side?” and he looked at Fenn who nodded in assent.

“Well that was a queer coincidence,” spoke Ned, as Fenn and the tramp were in the middle of the river on the return trip. “What in the world is he doing around here? Looks as though the secret hadn’t developed yet.”

“We must ask Fenn what sort of headquarters he has over there,” suggested Bart. “He’ll soon be back. There I meant to ask him to sell us some salt! He’s taken his back.”

“We can get it at the next town,” put in Frank. “We’ll camp just above it.”

CHAPTER XVIII

A NIGHT SCARE

“WHAT sort of a place has he over there?” asked Bart, as Fenn came back in the canoe.

“Not much,” was the reply. “I don’t believe he’s camping out at all. I saw some things in a pile on the ground, but they looked more like a lot of instruments than anything a man would go camping with. Besides, I didn’t see any boat.”

“What sort of instruments were they?” asked Ned.

“Kind I never saw before. All brass or nickle plated. Then there were some boxes. He seemed to be drying them out, so maybe he did have an upset of some sort.”

“There’s his boat now,” called Frank, and, as the boys watched, they saw the tramp appear from the woods with a canoe on his shoulder.

The boys watched the man carefully place the frail craft in the water. Then he went back into the woods again and came to the shore with something bright and shining in his hands.

“That’s one of the instruments,” said Fenn.

“Maybe he catches butterflies with it,” suggested Frank.

“That was a jolly he was giving us, about being a naturalist,” said Bart. “He’s up to some game, but I don’t see that it concerns us.”

“What’s next on the program?” asked Ned. “Pack up and move along?”

“Rest awhile; good for the digestion,” remarked Bart. “I want to see which way the tramp goes.”

The boys, lying on shore, in the shade, saw their recent guest paddle slowly down stream. They watched him until he disappeared around a bend.

“Well, that’s another link in the queer puzzle for us to solve,” spoke Ned. “By the way, Frank, did you ever make any inquiries of Judge Benton about whether there was any prospect of a new trolley line going through?”

“Yes, and he said he didn’t know of any. I told him about the men, but he said they might be surveyors dividing the land up into building lots. Mr. Bender is anxious to improve his property, he said.”

They broke camp and reached Woodport about five o’clock, got the salt and one or two other

things they happened to think might come in handy, and resumed their journey up the river. Woodport was a small place and they soon passed it, coming to a long stretch of water that flowed between densely wooded banks on either side.

“Good place to camp,” spoke Ned. “No one to bother us. There’s no fun camping close to a town.”

“Not unless you run out of salt or something like that,” replied Bart.

“Oh, well, one should get accustomed to doing without salt, or other things he can’t have,” Ned rejoined. “I believe I could get used to anything.”

“Good way to feel,” spoke Fenn. “I wish I could.”

“It takes strength of character,” Ned added.

“Don’t get preachy,” put in Frank.

“Say, instead of moralizing, you fellows had better be looking for a place to camp,” said Fenn, who, with Frank, was rowing. “I’m getting tired.”

“That looks like a good place over there,” came from Bart, indicating a spot where the trees did not seem to be so thick. “Little beach, too, for the boat to ground on so it won’t pound on the rocks if a wind comes up.”

The craft was put over to it, and a closer inspection showed the place to be well fitted for the purpose. The rowboat was tied to an overhanging tree and the tent was soon set up. Then a place was made for the stove and some supplies set out. A big tree stump served for a table and in a little while Fenn had a good fire built.

“What’s the menu?” he asked Bart.

“Open a can of chicken and we’ll fry it brown,” was the answer. “That, with bread and butter and coffee, will make a meal.”

Supper was soon on the “stump” and four very hungry boys gathered around it.

“Where’s the milk for the coffee?” asked Ned.

“I forgot it. It’s in the boat,” replied Fenn. “I’ll get it.”

He hurried down to where the craft was tied, and a moment later his companions heard him utter an exclamation.

“What’s the matter, did you fall in?” called Bart.

“No, but the can of condensed milk did, and it’s the only one we have.”

“Oh, hang it!” exclaimed Ned. “I can’t drink coffee without milk. What’s the matter with you, Stumpy?”

“I couldn’t help it. It slipped.”

"I'm thirsty for coffee, too," went on Ned.

"Use it without milk," suggested Bart.

"Can't. Never could."

"One should get accustomed to doing without salt, or other things he can't have. I believe I could get used to anything," spoke Frank solemnly.

"What do you — Oh!" exclaimed Ned. He recalled that those were the very words he had spoken a little while before.

"It takes strength of character," quoted Bart, still from the maxim Ned had laid down so recently.

"Oh well, of course I didn't mean it just that way," replied Ned, laughing at the trap he had fallen into. "I meant —"

"You don't know what you meant," replied Bart. "Come now, drink your coffee black, as the swells do when they go out to dinner. You'll get used to it."

"Have to, I s'pose," replied Ned, and he tried it, but made a wry face. However there was no help for it, and the boys were so hungry they didn't mind it much, after the first sip.

Supper over, the dishes and food were put away, and, on Bart's suggestion, they cut a quantity of wood to have in readiness for the camp fire.

“I don’t know’s we’ll need it,” he said. “There aren’t any animals but foxes, rabbits and coons in these woods. Still a fire looks cheerful, and it may be cold toward morning. Besides, it doesn’t seem like camping unless you have a fire.”

As it grew dark the boys looked to the fastenings of the boats for a wind might spring up and set them adrift. Then, starting a blaze between two big green logs, they got their blankets ready for bed.

They cut some cedar boughs which they laid on the ground to keep off the dampness, making several layers until Fenn, who tried it, said it was every bit as good as his spring bed at home.

“Going to stand watch?” inquired Ned.

“What’s the use?” asked Bart. “No one’s going to steal us. Besides I’m too sleepy. Let’s all go to bed. If any one happens to wake up and sees the fire is low, why he can throw a log on that will be all that’s necessary.”

They did not undress, but stretching out on the cedar boughs pulled the blankets over them and, prepared to sleep. The fire cast a ruddy glow on the trees and shone into the tent which was placed near the blaze.

Ned, who was a light sleeper, was suddenly awakened, some time after midnight, by hearing

a stick break. It sounded just back of him. He raised his head and listened. Behind the tent he could hear the cautious tread of some person or some animal. He was about to awaken Bart, who was sleeping next to him, when he saw a shadow cast by the fire, inside the tent, on the rear wall of the canvas. He looked out and was startled to see a figure between the tent and the camp fire. It appeared to be looking in on the boys. Ned stretched out his hand and touched Bart.

“Some one is in the camp!” he whispered in his companion’s ear, as Bart stirred.

CHAPTER XIX

THE FARMER AND THE BULL

“WHAT’S that?” exclaimed Bart, suddenly sitting up.

“Hush!” cautioned Ned. “Some one is prowling around!”

But Bart’s voice had startled the intruder. Ned saw the figure move quickly out of the glare of the flames, and then dart down toward the river.

“They’re after our boats!” yelled Bart, who at that moment saw the figure. “Come on, fellows!”

He ran from the tent followed by his three chums. As he passed the fire Bart threw on some light pieces of wood that blazed up quickly.

In the glow the figure of a man could be seen, headed on the run for the little beach, where the boats were tied. As he ran his coat appeared to flap out behind him, the long tails bobbing about from his motion.

“It’s that tramp!” exclaimed Ned.

“Hi there!” yelled Bart.

They saw the man make a flying leap into a canoe that was drawn up partly on shore. The violence of the motion sent the frail craft well out into the stream and it was caught by the current.

By this time the boys had reached the shore. At first they supposed it was their canoe which the tramp had stolen, but a second glance showed them the green craft still in place beside the rowboat.

"It's his own canoe," remarked Frank as the boys watched it floating down stream. There was no sign of the occupant.

"Is he in it or did he set it adrift and start to swim?" inquired Fenn. All four were standing on the edge of the water peering out over the river in the darkness, the canoe being a deeper blur which alone distinguished it from the surrounding blackness.

"He's probably lying down in it, thinking he may get shot at," said Bart.

As if to prove his words the sound of paddling was borne to their ears, and the canoe seemed to move faster. The tramp had begun to propel the craft, but they could not see him.

"Let's get back to bed," suggested Fenn. "I think we'd better keep watch after this."

"Not much use," came from Bart. "That tramp isn't likely to come back and there's no

one else around here. I vote we get what sleep we can."

It was decided this was as wise a thing as could be done and after replenishing the fire, so it would burn until morning, the campers crawled back into the tent and slept until sunrise, no further alarms disturbing them.

"Well, fellows," called Frank when the things had been put away. "What's the program for to-day?"

"We'll row up stream until noon," said Bart, "camp and have dinner, and, if we like the place, stay all night. If we don't we'll move on to a better one."

The boat was soon loaded and, with the canoe towing along behind, the trip was resumed. The river wound in and out through a wooded country for a few miles and then they came to a long straight stretch where it flowed between level fields.

As the boat was urged up stream under the impulse of the oars in the hands of Bart and Fenn, Ned, who was resting in the bow, called out:

"Steer her out a bit, Frank. There's a man fishing just ahead of us and we don't want to disturb him."

Frank who was at the rudder lines glanced up

and saw, about a quarter of a mile ahead, a man standing up to his waist in water.

“That’s a queer way to fish,” he remarked.

“Probably he’s hooked a big one and is playing him,” remarked Ned.

As they watched the man ran up out of the water and along the bank a few feet, and then, turning, he quickly waded out into deep water again.

“That’s a queer proceeding,” commented Bart, who turned to look at the man.

“Rather,” admitted Ned. “He must — Why a bull is after him!” he went on.

As he spoke the others saw a big black bull come tearing down the field straight toward the river. It stopped when it came to the water’s edge, opposite to where the man was standing in the stream up to his hips. There the beast lowered its head and, with an angry snort, pawed the soft mud.

“Row faster!” urged Frank. “Maybe we can help him.”

As the boat approached, the boys saw the man make several other attempts to leave the river. Each time he tried the bull would chase him back, but the animal seemed to be afraid of getting its feet wet, for it always stopped at the shore.

Sometimes the bull would withdraw some distance back into the field. At such times the man would wade along near shore until quite a ways above or below the animal. Then he would make a dash, hoping to fool the beast, but every time the bull heard him and came down with a rush.

The boys were now near enough to hear the man addressing the bull in no gentle tones. The prisoner in the water did not appear to notice the boat.

“Consarn your black hide!” he exclaimed. “Let me git out of this cold water, will ye? By Heck! Th’ next time I try t’ put a ring in your nose you’ll know it. Come now, Stonewall Jackson, let me out, will ye?”

But the bull seemed to have some grudge against the farmer for it lowered its horns and gave an angry bellow.

“If ever I git out of here I’ll hobble ye so’s ye can’t move, ye onery black critter!” the farmer went on. “I’ll whale ye till ye’ll wish ye’d behaved yerself, that’s what!”

This time the bull had gone back up the field and was browsing the grass. The farmer cautiously waded down stream and made a dash for shore. The bull heard him and came down so

fast that its momentum carried it several feet into the river before it could stop. Meanwhile the farmer had hurried deeper into the stream, splashing the water all over himself in his haste.

"If I had a gun I'd shoot ye!" he yelled, shaking his fist at the bull.

"Can't you swim to the other side?" asked Ned, as the boat came near.

The farmer looked around in surprise. He had been so engrossed by his contest with the bull he had not heard the craft approaching.

"I can't swim," he said. "Look at the plight I'm in. No one ever gets to this pasture. I come here to-day t' put a ring in this critter's nose. He broke away from the ropes I'd tied him with when I almost had it in, an' he chased me into th' water. He's kept me here over an hour an' I ain't had my breakfast. Every time I try to get out he charges."

"Why don't you go away up or far down the stream where he can't follow?" asked Bart.

"I've come down a mile from where I started," the farmer said. "I'm plumb tired out an' I know I'll catch cold stayin' in th' water so long. If I ever git holt of that 'tarnation critter I'll —"

He didn't finish, for, while he had been talking he had been drawing near shore. The bull was

watching him, and made another dash that sent the farmer scurrying for deep water.

“That’s the way he does it,” he said to the boys, his voice showing the despair he felt.

CHAPTER XX

FOLLOWED BY SANDY

“I HAVE it!” exclaimed Frank. “Get into our boat and we’ll land you anywhere you want.”

“Will ye?” asked the farmer. “That’ll be th’ thing. I’ll fool th’ savage critter. This is where I git ahead of ye, Stonewall Jackson,” he added, shaking his fist again at the bull.

“Is that his name?” asked Ned.

“I named him that about an hour ago,” the farmer said. “He was wuss than a stone wall for me, th’ way he kept me from gittin’ out of th’ river. ’Fore that his name was jest plain William.”

“Named after any one?” inquired Bart as the farmer got into the rowboat.

“Not special. Ye see I took him for a debt a feller owed me, an’ I named him William ’cause I took him for a bill, see? Bill bein’ short for William.”

“Oh, you needn’t explain,” said Bart, as he joined in the laugh that followed.

“I’ve got th’ best on ye now,” the farmer went

on, looking at the beast as the boys rowed the boat out into deeper water.

The bull seemed to think so, for with a loud bellow it went back to the middle of the pasture and began eating.

"He fairly had me," the farmer said. "He could run along shore a good deal faster than I could wade in th' water, and th' pasture runs along th' river for three miles, without a fence wuth speakin' of. I couldn't see no way of escapin'. It's lucky you come along. Are you boatin' for a livin'?"

"No, we're taking a sort of vacation," replied Ned.

"Had breakfast?" inquired the farmer.

"Oh yes, early this morning."

"Wish I had. Next time I try t' ring a bull's nose 'fore I git my meal I'll be a older man. I was goin' t' ask ye t' have some breakfast with me," he went on. "My name's Garfield Johnson. I've got quite a farm."

"Much obliged, Mr. Johnson," said Bart, "but we're just roughing it, and we're not dressed for company."

"Green onions! Neither be I!" exclaimed the farmer. "Look at my boots, all wet and my pants too. I wonder what Mandy'll say."

Mandy's my wife," he added, "an' she's dreadful particular."

The boys beached the boat in about half an hour, and tying it fast followed Mr. Johnson to his house, facing on a lane which led out to a country road.

"We'll go in th' back way," said Mr. Johnson. "Mandy's particular about her floors, an' I'm sorter —." He looked down at his trousers, which still dripped water, and laughed.

Mr. Johnson introduced the boys to his wife, telling her what had happened. She insisted that the chums remain to breakfast which they did, though they had eaten a few hours previously. They declined an invitation to stay to dinner. Mr. Johnson made them take a big pail of milk, while his wife added a bag of home-made crullers and some cheese, which formed a welcome addition to their larder.

"If you row up stream a mile you'll be right opposite the village, or you can go by the road," said the farmer as they bade him and his wife good-bye.

Fenn and Bart decided they would walk, and let Frank and Ned row the boat up and meet them. They wanted to get some condensed milk and matches, of which they had run out.

The supplies were purchased and, in a little while the other boys arriving took Bart and Fenn aboard. Then the trip up the river was resumed. They kept on until late in the afternoon, as their double breakfast did away with the necessity for dinner. On the way they passed a number of steamers and barges bound for Lake Erie. Some of them were loaded with lumber and other commodities, while several were going up the river empty, to get freight.

The boys found a fine place to camp that night and liked it so well they remained there three days. They had pleasant weather and thoroughly enjoyed themselves, paddling about, fishing and going in swimming.

They decided they would go no further up the stream, and, having camped out at their last stop for another day they packed up for the return trip. The weather, which had been fine, seemed threatening, and they had not brought along clothing or blankets which would serve in case of rain.

"We'll make it in two stages," said Bart, referring to the home journey. "One night's camp will fix it so's we'll not be all tired out when we get home."

They started early in the morning, and planned

to camp just above Woodport. It was nearly dusk when they neared the town.

“Hark!” exclaimed Ned, as the boats were gliding along close to shore. “Do you fellows hear anything?”

They all listened.

“Sounds like some one paddling a canoe behind us,” spoke Bart.

“That’s what I think. I’ve been hearing it for the last ten minutes,” Ned went on. “Some one is following us.”

“Maybe it’s that tramp,” suggested Fenn.

“I’m going to find out,” Ned remarked. “You and Frank row along slowly, Bart, and I’ll surprise whoever it is.”

It was now quite dark. The noise made by the oars drowned the sound of the paddles, if the unknown was still following the chums.

Ned was busy in the stern of the boat. He twisted a torch from papers and then soaked the end in kerosene oil from the lantern they had.

“Stop rowing,” he whispered to his chums, “but keep the oars in motion so they’ll make a noise as if we were still going. He’ll think we’re are on the move and keep after us.”

Frank and Bart did as Ned suggested. They

could not hear the sound of the paddle but Ned could. Suddenly there was a little glow of light as Ned struck a match. Then there was a burst of flame as the oil-soaked paper caught. Ned tossed it away from the boat. It blazed up brightly and in the glare, as it floated on the water, the boys saw a canoe just behind them.

But the greatest surprise was occasioned by a sight of the paddler. As the light gleamed on him the chums saw he was Sandy Merton.

“Sandy!” exclaimed Ned.

Then the light went out, making the darkness blacker than before.

CHAPTER XXI

AT THE FAIR

“QUICK! Hand me some more paper!” exclaimed Ned.

Bart passed him a wad. Without stopping to put oil on it Ned lighted the twisted torch. As the flame grew in brightness he held it above his head to cast a glow over the water. But there was no canoe in sight save the one trailing behind their own boat.

“He’s gone!” exclaimed Fenn.

“Well, we found out who it was,” remarked Ned, “and that’s something.”

“It would be more to find out why he was following us,” came from Frank.

“Maybe he’s camping around here,” suggested Bart.

“If he is, he was quite a way from camp,” put in Ned. “I’d been hearing soft paddling behind us for the last two miles and I determined to see who it was.”

“Guess he didn’t want to be seen, by the way he disappeared in such a hurry,” Fenn remarked.

“We’ll have to keep watch to-night,” said Bart. “We don’t want Sandy or any of his friends sneaking around.”

“That’s right,” assented Ned.

They lighted the lantern and, by the gleam of it, and by that from a fire they kindled on shore, they made their camp. A hasty meal was prepared and then the shelter tent was put up. A big pile of brushwood was collected for the fire and, dividing the night into four watches, of which Bart took the first, they spread out the blankets and the other three prepared to sleep.

But the weather, which had favored them all their trip, turned against them now. It began to rain about ten o’clock and from then, until morning, there was a steady downpour.

However they made the best of it, though the tent did leak, and the fire refused to do anything more than smoulder. It was rather a cheerless breakfast they had, for the coffee was only lukewarm and the bacon half done. But they made jokes about it and soon were on their way down the river.

“Guess it was too wet for Sandy,” observed Bart, as he tilted his hat so the rain would not drip down his neck.

They left the canoe at Riverton and made the

best time possible to Darewell. Wet through, but happy in spite of it all they reached their homes, fully satisfied with their trip.

The next morning as Fenn was taking a short cut across lots to get to Frank's house, he heard a noise as though two birds were calling to one another in a little clump of bushes. The notes came clear and sweet and Fenn paused to catch a sight of the songsters. As he did so something in the bushes moved, a robin flew out and John Newton came into view. As he did so Fenn realized that John was one of the "birds."

"What were you doing?" asked Fenn, who was once more on friendly, if not intimate terms with John.

"Practicing that robin call."

"What for?"

"I'm learning to imitate all kinds of birds," replied John.

"Thought you were working as special delivery messenger at the postoffice?"

"I was but I gave it up. Too much inside. I want to get out where I can hear the birds. I can imitate twenty different kinds now."

"What good is it?"

"Maybe I can get a job on the stage some day, and it will come in handy. I heard a fellow in

a theater orchestra try to imitate a bird once, and it wasn't anything as good as I can do."

"If you get on the stage I'll come and see you," said Fenn, little thinking that his promise was some day to come true.

"Thanks," replied John, as he walked off across the field, looking for more birds to practice with, while Fenn went on to Frank's house.

That afternoon Ned and Fenn went over to Bart's house and found him cleaning a small rifle.

"What's up?" asked Fenn.

"Getting ready to go frog hunting," said Bart. "Dad likes their hind legs fried in butter and I said I'd get him a mess."

"Where you going?" asked Ned.

"Over to Ducker's pond. There's lots of 'em there."

"Want any company?" inquired Fenn.

"Sure, come along. Get your rifles. There's a boat over there. Tell Frank and we'll make a day of it."

"They ought to be out plentiful after the rain," remarked Ned. "I'd like to get some for my father. He is fond of 'em."

The boys found frog-hunting great sport. As they walked home in the twilight they passed a field in which a crowd of men were gathered about

numerous wagons. Here and there tents were being raised.

“What’s this?” asked Bart.

“Why it’s the traveling fair,” replied Ned. “Don’t you remember, it’s been advertised for the last two weeks? It must have just gotten in. Come on over.”

Ned’s surmise proved correct. A large traveling show and fair combined had reached Darewell, where it was to remain for three days. There had been a delay, caused by a break-down of some of the wagons, and, instead of arriving in the early morning, they had only now reached the grounds.

A throng had been attracted by the show, and scores of the boys of the town were offering their services to help put up the tents. The burly men in charge, however, went about their business systematically, and, working by the glare of gasolene torches, soon had some of the tents raised, though the main one would not be in place until morning.

In one part of the grounds the cooking wagon with its portable ranges was in full operation, and hungry men and women performers were making a hasty meal.

“Let’s take these frogs home and come back

after supper," proposed Bart. "We can have some fun."

This the lads did. They found a bigger crowd than before at the fair grounds, more wagons having arrived with the exhibits.

"Out of the way there!" yelled a hoarse voice as a big vehicle, drawn by four horses, approached where the chums were standing. As they moved out of its path they saw, painted on the side of the wagon in large letters, that showed plainly in the flaring torches, the word:

BALLOON.

"That's so, there's going to be a balloon ascension every day," said Ned. "We'll have to take this in to-morrow."

"That's what we will," replied Bart. "I've never seen a balloon go up."

"You'll have a chance to go up in one if you want to," put in Fenn.

"How?"

"Why this is a captive balloon. It's fast to the ground by a rope. They let persons go up in it for a half dollar apiece."

"Then we'll go up," decided Frank. "I've always wanted a ride in one."

CHAPTER XXII

UP IN A BALLOON

IT was a good thing the fair came during the vacation season, otherwise there would have been slim classes in the schools of Darewell, judging by the throng of boys and girls at the small city of tents, the next day. It seemed that every youngster in the county was on hand long before the time set for the opening.

Many came to watch the men put the big tent up, and the four chums were among this crowd. There was much to interest them in the way the canvas was handled, and to see what appeared a tangled mass of ropes and coverings be evolved into a big shelter, gay with flags and bunting.

"I want to watch 'em get the balloon ready," said Ned, after they had seen the main tent well under way.

"So do I," chimed in Bart.

The big bag that was destined to sail through the air was being prepared off to one side, and men were laying pipes from a gas main to where

it was to be filled. It was a modern affair, intended to be inflated with illuminating vapor instead of hot air as is sometimes the case.

"I wonder how high up it goes?" asked Bart!

"Let's inquire of one of the men," suggested Frank.

There was such a big crowd around the laborers that they found it almost impossible to work. They fairly had to shove some of the boys and other spectators out of the way.

"Don't believe they'll have much time to answer questions," ventured Fenn.

Just then a big man, who seemed to be in charge of matters, called to one of the assistants, a short chap.

"Hi, Sam, bring five of those ballast bags over here and get a move on! Don't go to sleep! We haven't got all day!"

The little man glanced at a pile of bags of sand near where the boys were standing. Each bag had a rope handle with a hook attached to it. The little man dropped the coil of rope he had in his arms.

"Bring five of 'em over!" he exclaimed. "Must think I'm Sandow. It's all I can do to lift one. They weigh forty pounds a piece," and, still grumbling, the little man tackled the bags.

It was evident that two, at the most, were all he could manage. Ned, who was watching him saw an opportunity.

"Come on, fellows," he whispered to his chums. "We'll give him a hand and maybe he'll tell us something about the balloon."

An instant later the four boys hurried to the pile of ballast.

"We'll help you," said Bart. "Where do you want 'em?"

"Oh!" exclaimed the little man evidently somewhat surprised at the offer of help. "Right over there where the boss is. Say, you boys are all right!"

The four chums each took hold of a bag. They found them about all they wanted to carry.

"How high up does the balloon go?" asked Fenn, determined to take advantage of the opportunity.

"Thousand feet," the man replied. "It's held fast by a thin wire cable that goes over a drum. You boys going up?"

"I guess so," replied Ned.

"Interested in balloons; eh?"

"Sure thing," replied Bart. "Have you been running 'em long?"

"Fifteen years. Ain't much I don't know

about 'em, though I don't go up very often. I won't do the parachute business, and they want a man who does that now-a-days. I'm getting too old for that."

By this time the ballast had been deposited where the man in charge wanted it.

"Hook it into the cordage now," he ordered to the little man, "and you take charge around here, Bill. She's filling now and I'm going to breakfast."

"All right," responded Bill, the newly-made acquaintance of the chums. The boys wanted to ask him more questions, but he saved them the trouble.

"Ever see a balloon fill?" he inquired.

"No. How do they do it?" asked Frank.

"First we spread the bag out on the ground," the little man explained. "Then we see to the top valve. That's to let the gas out when it's up in the air. There's a cord runs from the valve down to the basket. You pull it a little bit and two little trap doors, worked by springs open, and the vapor escapes from the top. Then we have what's called the 'ripping cord.' That's colored red. It hangs down just as the other one does. Only if you yank that it tears a strip out of the balloon and lets the gas out in a hurry."

“What happens then?” asked Ned.

“You come down in a hurry, that’s all. It’s only used for emergency. Well, after we get the bag laid out the way we want it, and the gas pipes connected, we lay the cordage or net over it. Then the balloon begins to fill. We hook on the sand bags, all round the edge of the netting, so’s to keep her steady as she fills. When the gas begins to lift the bags a bit we hook ’em on lower down in the netting, and so on, until the balloon is full. Then we hitch on the basket, put in the proper amount of ballast, and it’s all ready to go up.”

“You let it go up a thousand feet and then pull it down by the wire cable?” asked Bart.

“That’s it. It can make a lot of trips during a day with one filling of gas. When it begins to collapse we put in more.”

“Suppose it should break away?” asked Ned.

“It never has happened with this outfit, though of course it might. I had one get away once.”

“What happened?”

“Why my assistant and myself were in it. We didn’t get scared, as we were old hands at the business. We just pulled the valve cord and let ourselves down easy. The bad part of it was it was at the seashore and we came down in the

ocean. We lost the balloon but we saved our lives."

"Did you ever have to pull the ripping cord?" asked Bart.

"Once. You see that's to use when you want to land in a hurry. I was up in the balloon once and it began to descend. Gas leaked out and I didn't know it. There was a strong wind and I was being blown out across Lake Michigan that time. It was a case of coming down quick and hard on dry land or being blown out over the lake. I yanked the ripping cord."

"What happened?" asked Fenn, as the little man stopped.

"Broke both legs," he replied. "Laid up two months. That sort of discouraged me and I haven't gone up much since. Make enough money as a helper and I sleep better nights."

"Is there much danger in a captive balloon?" asked Ned.

"Hardly any. In fact none to speak of," was the answer. "We've got a tested wire cable. It winds over a drum and when the drum is turned it winds the cable up and the balloon comes down."

"I guess we'll risk it," said Ned, "Eh, fellows."

"You can't leave me behind," said Bart, and

the others agreed they would take a chance in the balloon.

All this while the big bag had been filling. The man and several others who were assisting, kept hooking the ballast lower in the cordage loops as the balloon arose in the air. It was over half full now.

The boys took a look at the square basket, or car, that was to be attached to the airship, and at the windlass which brought the captive balloon back to earth.

“Let’s go home and get breakfast and come back,” suggested Bart, as the boys had arisen early that morning. “We’ll take the trip this afternoon.”

The boys returned to the grounds about nine o’clock. It was after ten o’clock before the first ascension was made. Four young men from town went up, that being all the car would hold. The manager cautioned them about touching the cords and then, while the anxious throng watched and waited, the cable began to unwind and the balloon went up.

“That looks easy enough,” declared Bart. “Us for the trip next time.”

Up and up the balloon went until it looked about the size of an apple. It remained up about

ten minutes and then the windlass was turned by the steam engine, which was part of the outfit, and the airship came slowly down.

“How’d you like it?” asked the manager as the young men got out.”

“Fine!” they exclaimed as one. “It was great. I could see clear to Woodport.”

“Now who’s going to be the next?” asked the manager in his professional voice. “Try a trip in the airship! View the earth spread out like a map beneath you, the fields mere patches of green, the river a silver ribbon and the forest a mere bit of fuzz like the wool on Mary’s little lamb. Who’s next?”

“We are!” cried Bart, and he and his chums paid their money and took their places in the basket.

“Let her go,” cried the manager, and the boys, looking over the edge of the car, saw the earth dropping away below them.

CHAPTER XXIII

ABOVE THE CLOUDS

“WHAT’S the matter?” called Fenn, his voice trembling a little.

“The matter with what?” asked Bart, whose tones were not overly strong just then.

“Why we seem to be standing still and the earth is going down.”

“That’s always the way in a balloon, I’ve read,” spoke Frank. “We can’t see ourselves move as there’s nothing to judge it by. You can’t see the air, and that’s what we’re moving through.”

“Well, it’s a little more scary than I thought it was,” came from Ned. “Still I guess we can get used to it.”

By the time they had been elevated five hundred feet they were accustomed to the strange and peculiar sensation. They were no longer frightened, and when they had gone up as far as the cable would let them they were almost wishing the journey was twice as long. As the manager had said, the country was spread out under them like a big relief map. They could recognize some

buildings in town, and also pick out other hamlets surrounding Darewell. Bart even declared he could see the clearing where Sandy had stood on guard, and where the men had been observed acting so strangely that day, but the others were not able to make it out.

At the end of ten minutes the balloon was hauled down. The boys climbed from the basket, trying to answer the scores of questions that were asked of them by persons in the crowd. After that many made trips in the captive airship.

“It was great,” declared Bart.

“I almost wish it had gotten loose,” said Ned. “I’d like to take a long trip.”

“We’ll try it again to-morrow,” said Bart, “only don’t you go wishing it would break loose, Ned. It might happen, you know.”

“That wire cable couldn’t break.”

“All right. I don’t want it to.”

For a long while the boys remained to watch the balloon go up and down with the scores who ventured in it. Then, as there were many other things to see at the fair, they made a tour of the grounds.

They were on hand the next day, and made another trip in the balloon. This time it was a little foggy and they could not see so well.

“Half price to-morrow boys,” remarked the manager, as they came down. “It’s the last day.”

“We’ll have to take it in,” declared Fenn. “Can’t miss a bargain like that.”

So great an attraction did the reduced rate prove that it was afternoon of the last day of the fair before the four chums had a chance to go up in the balloon again. Once more they got into the big basket. The captive airship had been freshly filled with gas and was pulling and tugging at the restraining cable as though it wanted to be free.

“Let her go,” called the manager, and for the third time the boys saw the earth dropping away beneath them. They could not get over that first queer sinking feeling in the stomach as the balloon first started skyward, but, after it had gone up a few hundred feet they were used to it.

The day was a wonderfully clear one, and the boys could see for miles in every direction. Off to the northwest Lake Erie sparkled in the sunlight, and the Still river looked like a band of silver laid between green banks and through dark green forests.

“Isn’t it fine!” exclaimed Frank. “I wish we could stay up all night.”

“I guess we’re going down,” remarked Ned, as

there came a tug at the bottom of the basket where the cable was fastened.

The balloon gave a little jerk and swayed from side to side. The boys clutched the edge of the basket and looked over.

“Something has happened!” cried Ned.

They could see the crowd running to and fro and a number of men signaling to them with their hands.

“What could have happened?” asked Frank. “Is the balloon on fire?”

“No! It’s broken loose!” yelled Fenn. “See! The cable is dangling below us!”

Leaning over as far as they dared, the others saw that the wire rope had become loosened from the drum and was swaying about in the air. It had become unfastened when the machinery began to revolve to haul the balloon down.

“We’re loose! We’re going up!” almost screamed Fenn.

Down below them the earth once more was dropping away at a fearful rate. The freshly-filled balloon was shooting skyward faster than ever before, since there was no restraining cable to hold it back.

The terror of their position held the boys dumb

for a while. They gazed at each other with horror in their eyes. Their cheeks were pale, and their hearts were beating violently.

Being taken so suddenly into the lighter atmosphere of the upper regions almost deprived them of their senses. They could hardly breathe, partly because of natural causes and partly because of the terrible fright that gripped them.

"You — you — got — your — wish, Ned," spoke Bart with some difficulty, looking at his chum.

"I — I — guess — I — did," replied Ned slowly.

Their voices seemed to dispel the strain they were all under. They had been fearful of moving since the balloon broke away, thinking they might fall from the terrible height. But now Bart sat down in the bottom of the basket.

"Well, we might be worse off," spoke Frank.

"How?" asked Fenn.

"We might be falling down instead of up. We're in no danger for a while anyhow. There's no wind to speak of. We're going straight up."

"How far I wonder?" asked Ned.

"Well, we can stop when we want to," said Bart.

"How?" inquired Fenn.

"By pulling the valve cord, of course. Don't you know what the man told us?"

"Oh, of course. Well then, let's pull it. This is high enough for me."

They all stood up and began looking for the valve and ripping cords. The man had told them they were connected with the basket, but on previous trips they had not thought to search them out amid the mass of cordage.

"One's brown and the other's red," spoke Bart.

"I don't see any," said Fenn, after a long gaze aloft.

"I either," admitted Bart, and the others had to confess they saw nothing of the cords.

"Maybe they forgot to arrange them for this trip," suggested Ned.

"Nice pickle for us if they did," observed Bart. "We'll sail on forever."

But, though the boys made light of their plight, it was not a pleasant one. The balloon with its fresh supply of gas was good for many miles' travel.

"I wonder if we're going up or standing still?" asked Fenn. He looked over the edge of the basket. The ground below was a mere blur, of

which the only difference in color between the woods and the fields could be seen.

“We can soon tell,” replied Bart.

“How?”

“I’ll show you.”

He took from his pocket some paper and began tearing it into little pieces. When he had a handful he tossed them over the side of the basket. They seemed pulled down by some unseen force.

“We’re going up,” announced Bart in a strange voice. “Those papers practically stood still. It was us shooting past them that made it look as though they fell.

“How far up are we I wonder?” said Fenn.

A moment later a damp mist appeared to settle down over the balloon. So dense was it that they could no longer make out the big bag over their heads.

“We’re above the clouds,” came from Bart in solemn tones.

CHAPTER XXIV

INTO THE RIVER

FOR a moment the announcement struck such a chill of terror to the hearts of the boys that they did not know what to say. The thought of being more than a mile above the earth was fearful to the lads who had never been even on a high mountain. Now they were far up in the air, with only the frail willow basket, and the lifting power of the gas in the silken bag, between them and death.

"Maybe it's a fog from the river. Perhaps we've dropped down," said Fenn, anxious to derive some consolation from their perilous position.

"We haven't come down a foot," said Bart. "Might as well admit it."

He tossed some more pieces of the torn paper over the side. This time they remained stationary.

"At any rate we've stopped going up," he called out. "We're standing still!"

His companions watched the scraps of paper anxiously. Slowly they began to settle toward the earth.

"That proves it," said Bart. "We're standing still."

"Lot of good it will do us," came from Ned. "How long will we have to stay here?"

"Hard to say," Bart replied. "But you wanted this to happen so you ought to be satisfied."

"If I'd known it was like this I'd never wished for it even in fun," spoke Ned. "Don't you s'pose we can get down?"

"Sure; sometime. The gas can't stay in the bag forever. Some is bound to leak out and we'll descend. Besides, as it gets colder we'll drop some."

"How?" asked Frank.

"Why the man told me the cold sort of condenses the gas. Makes it so there isn't so much of it, and it hasn't the same lifting power. But there's one disadvantage to that."

"How?" inquired Fenn.

"Why as soon as it gets warm again, when the sun comes out, it expands the gas and we'll rise."

"Keep on going back and forth, eh?" asked Ned.

"That's about it," said Bart.

"I've got a plan," suggested Fenn.

"What, Stumpy?" inquired his chums eagerly.

“I could cut a hole in the bag with my knife and let some of the gas out.”

“How could you reach the bag? The lowest end of it, the neck, where the gas went in, is ten feet over our heads.”

“I could climb up the cordage. I read of a fellow doing that once.”

“Too risky,” decided Bart.

“I’ll chance it,” declared Stumpy.

“We’ll wait a while,” Bart decided. “We may come down without doing that.”

But there did not seem much chance of it. The big balloon was still in the midst of the clouds. Which way they were going the boys had no means of knowing. They could see nothing but the mass of gray vapor, which, now and then, swirled aside long enough to disclose the black bag above their heads.

Meanwhile there was great excitement on the fair grounds. The crowd ran to and fro vainly seeking some means of bringing the balloon down. Word was quickly sent to the boys’ parents and relatives, and they came hurrying to the place, well nigh distracted. By this time the airship was a mere speck in the heavens. A little later it disappeared above the clouds.

There were some threats of arresting the man-

ager of the enterprise, but wiser counsel prevailed. It was shown that the accident was unavoidable. The catch that fastened the wire cable to the drum had become loosened by the many ascensions and let the rope slip away.

"There's no danger," the manager declared, but he had hard work to make any one believe him. Indeed his own drawn face showed he was alarmed for the safety of the boys.

"They're bright lads," he insisted. "One of my helpers was explaining to them the other day about the valve cords. They will pull them and the balloon will come down. It may sail a few miles from here, but they'll be all right."

"Suppose they pull the wrong cord?" asked Mr. Wilding who with Bart's and Fenn's parents, and Frank's uncle had gathered about the manager.

"Oh, they wouldn't do that," said the owner of the balloon. "They're too smart for that."

"Well, there's no good in worrying," decided Mr. Keene. "Maybe the boys can take care of themselves, but they're in a ticklish place."

His words served to comfort the others somewhat, though Mrs. Keene and Mrs. Masterson could not stop crying.

Meanwhile there was nothing the boys could do.

They could only wait for something to happen. And that something was for the gas to leave the bag gradually so they could descend.

"It's almost five o'clock," said Bart, looking at his watch. "I guess we're good for all night."

"It's going to be cold," said Ned, with a shiver.

Already the mist was beginning to tell on the boys. Their clothes were covered with the fine fog which clung to them like frost. They knew it would be quite chilly before morning.

"And not a thing to eat," said Bart with a sigh. "The next time I come ballooning I'm going to bring a sandwich."

"The next time I come ballooning I'll be a great deal older than I am now," came from Frank. "No more for yours truly."

"What I can't understand," said Fenn, "is what become of those cords. They must be on the balloon. I saw them the first day."

"Suppose we take another look," suggested Ned. "I don't fancy staying here all night."

"If we don't find 'em I'm going to climb up and poke a hole in the bag," declared Stumpy.

The boys took their positions one on each side of the big basket and began staring aloft, through the mist, for a sight of the cords. There was such

a maze of ropes and netting that it was hard to distinguish anything. The mist too, bothered them.

There came a little puff of wind which made the big balloon sway so that the boys clutched the sides of the willow car. There was a peculiar sensation as though the bottom of their stomachs had dropped out.

“We’re going down!” cried Bart.

The mist seemed to break away. The bag could be plainly seen. Hurriedly Bart tore up some more scraps of paper and tossed them over. They remained stationary an instant and then began to settle earthward.

“False alarm,” said Bart with despair in his voice.

But they had gone down a few feet, or else the mist had lifted, for they were no longer in the cloud. They could see nothing of the earth, however.

All at once Fenn who had resumed his upward-gazing gave a cry.

“What is it, Stumpy?” called Bart.

“The cords! The cords! I see them!” the boy exclaimed.

“Where?” and they all came around to his side.

“There, right near where the mouth of the bag is fastened to the cordage. “Don’t you see them?”

“Sure enough! There they are!” exclaimed Bart.

Then the others beheld the brown and red cords that connected, one with the valve in the top, and the other with the strip, to be ripped out, in case of emergency.

“We can’t reach ’em,” said Ned. “They’re ten feet up.”

This was so. The ends of the cords had, in some way, been caught in the netting and were held at least ten feet above the edge of the basket. To reach them meant a dizzy and dangerous climb.

Stumpy looked first from one side of the basket and then from the other, at the cords that meant so much to them. He took off his coat and vest and began removing his shoes.

“What are you going to do?” asked Bart.

“I’m going to get those cords down where we can reach ’em,” said Fenn shortly.

“How? You can’t!”

“You watch me! Didn’t I take the prize at school for high trapeze work?” and Stumpy went on unlacing his shoes.

“Are you going to climb up in that cordage?” demanded Ned.

“That’s what I am.”

“We won’t let you!”

“It’s the only way!” said Fenn earnestly. “We may be killed if I don’t. There’s no danger boys. I’ll climb from the inside. If I fall, I’ll only fall into the basket! I’m going up!”

Before the others could stop him he had reached up and taken a firm hold of the cords just above the edge of the basket. They were very strong, and there were so many of them that they would have held a much greater weight than that of Fenn.

But it was a ticklish thing to climb up the netting of a balloon, more than half a mile above the earth. True, he was right over the basket, and if he slipped would land into it. But it was a daring thing to do, and his chums held their breaths as they watched him.

Up and up Stumpy went. His stockinged feet gave him a good purchase on the netting, and, clinging with his hands in a desperate grip, he mounted higher and higher toward where the caught cords dangled. It was only about ten feet but to Stumpy and his chums it seemed like a thousand.

Now he was but three feet away from the cords. Cautiously he kept on. The balloon swayed with the unusual weight on one side and the basket tilted.

For a moment Fenn hesitated. He was getting dizzy. Then he gritted his teeth and went on. Steadying himself as best he could, in the insecure and waving netting, he reached out one hand and managed to grasp the red cord. He loosened it and it fell so that it hung within reach of his comrades. Then he released the brown one and it, too, fell free.

"Come down!" called Ned, and Stumpy, his dangerous task accomplished, began to descend. He was trembling like a leaf when he crouched down in the basket again. His chums, each in turn, silently pressed his hand. They could not speak for a few moments.

"Now for home!" exclaimed Bart as he grasped the brown cord. "Lie down in the bottom of the basket, all of you. No telling what will happen when the gas begins to go out."

He pulled the cord slightly. There was a sudden lurch to the balloon and again came that strange feeling as if the bottom of their stomachs were dropping out.

"We're going down!" cried Frank joyfully.

It was so. The gas escaped through the valve as Bart pulled the cord, and the big airship, its journey almost ended, was nearing the earth.

As the valves would only stay open when the cord was taut, springing shut when it was slack, Bart kept giving it little jerks, regulating them according to the sensation of falling. He did not want the balloon to come down too swiftly.

It was now dusk, and, as they looked over the side of the basket they could dimly distinguish the earth coming up to meet them.

"Can you see where we are?" asked Ned.

"Too dark," replied Bart.

He opened the valve wider. The balloon shot downward with a sickening swiftness.

"Not so fast," called Frank.

He got up to look over the edge. As he did so he uttered a cry.

"We're near the river!" he exclaimed.

Bart let out more gas, hoping to land the balloon before the water was reached, but he miscalculated. An instant later the airship, with the big bag almost collapsed, came down with a rush and the willow basket struck the water with a great splash.

“Jump out and swim for it!” yelled Bart.
“The balloon will smother you!”

He dived over the side of the basket. His companions followed him. There was a sickening smell of gas in the air.

CHAPTER XXV

CAPTURED

HAMPERED by their shoes and clothing the boys could not make much headway in the water. Fenn, who was not a very good swimmer, was the last to strike out. Bart caught a glimpse of him, and saw the bag settling down over his chum.

He turned and grabbed Fenn by the shoulder, pulling him out of the way just as the silken folds settled down on top of the water.

“What’s the matter? What has happened?” cried a voice through the darkness, and the boys saw lights from a boat flashing in their faces. Then they noticed a big barge looming up, and struck out for it.

“Throw us a line!” called Bart.

Aboard the boat men were running to and fro and calling to one another. More lights flashed out and several figures appeared at the sides. Then ropes splashed into the water.

Bart and Fenn each grabbed one and began to pull themselves aboard. Ned and Frank were on

the other side of the barge. There also, men had cast cables into the river and their splash told the swimming boys there was help at hand. They grabbed the lines, and soon all four were standing on the deck of the craft.

“Well, where did you all come from?” asked a hearty voice and a big man, his face almost concealed by a beard, that covered everything except his eyes, strode forward.

“From the balloon,” replied Ned.

“So that’s what that big thing was that flopped down here, eh?” asked the man. “Well, you had quite a time of it. Who are you, anyhow, airship men?”

Ned told their names, and related how the balloon had broken away, taking them with it.

“I guess it’s valuable,” he added. “Maybe if you took it aboard you could get a reward.”

“We’ve got something else to do besides saving balloons,” the bearded man replied. “Delayed our trip as it was, pulling you chaps from the water, but I don’t mind that. Let ’em send for their old gas bag if they want it. Guess it won’t run away.”

“Are you the captain of this boat?” asked Bart, taking off his coat and wringing some of the water out of it.

"That's what I am, Captain Needham, of the steam barge *Comet*. At present under sealed orders," and he laughed.

"Where are we?" asked Frank.

"On the Still river, just above Dunkirk," replied the captain.

"How far is that from Darewell?" inquired Bart.

"Are you from Darewell?" asked Captain Needham quickly, and he looked sharply at the boys who stood in a circle of light cast by several lanterns.

"Yes. That's where we live," replied Bart.

"Well, you're about fifty miles from home."

"Which way are you going?" asked Frank, as the barge was anchored then, and the boys had not had time to notice in which direction she was headed.

"We're going up the river."

"Then I guess we'd better go ashore," remarked Ned. "We don't want to get any further away from home. We must send word to our folks that we're safe."

"Of course," spoke the captain. "It's going to be a little difficult though. There's no telephone in Dunkirk, and you'll have to tramp five miles to send a message. You'd better stay aboard until

we get to Flanders, that's the next town above. We'll be there by morning, and you can wire from there."

"I think we'd better go ashore now and take our chances at getting a message through to-night," Frank said. "Maybe we can hire a carriage in Dunkirk."

"Well now, I hate to interfere with your plans," the captain said, "but I'm behindhand now, and I can't stop to put you ashore. You'll have to wait until morning."

"One of us could swim ashore and send a message," put in Ned. "We really ought to send one."

"Well, go below to the engine room and get dried out first," the captain advised. "The river is full of rocks here and it's a bad place to swim. The banks are a mass of muck, like quick-sand, dangerous to venture into. You get your clothes off and we'll soon have 'em dry. By that time we'll be in a better place for swimming. Besides you must be hungry. We're under way again."

As he spoke there was a throbbing to the barge that told the boys the engine had been started. The anchor was hauled up and the boat again

started up the river. It was too dark to see more than the dim outline of the big gas bag as it rested partly on shore and partly in the water.

“Yes, I guess drying-out wouldn’t hurt us,” Frank said. “But after that we must get word to the folks if we have to walk ten miles.”

“That’s right,” agreed his chums.

“Suit yourselves,” the captain said. “Now come on with me and I’ll fix you up.”

He led the way to the engine room, and turned the boys over to one of the deck hands. The latter collected from the men some old garments the boys could don while their own were drying. Their change consisted of nothing but a jumper and a pair of overalls each, but it was warm in the engine room and they did not mind. Their soaking clothing and shoes were soon in the process of steaming dry on hot pipes.

“‘All’s well that ends well’” quoted Frank. “We certainly did have a strenuous time of it for a while though.”

“Wonder where this barge is going to?” said Ned. “It’s a bigger one than I ever saw on the river before. It’s got a lot of machinery aboard, too.”

“That doesn’t interest me so much as the ques-

tion of when they have supper," came from Bart. "I'm getting warm and dry and I begin to feel my appetite coming back."

They were close to the big boiler where it was warm enough to almost bake bread. As they were huddled there, getting the river chill out of them, they heard somebody approaching down the passage that led to the engine room.

"Hope it's someone to say supper is ready," spoke Fenn.

"Captain Needham says you are to —" a voice began and then it suddenly stopped. The chums looked up and saw, in the glare from a lantern, a youth staring at them.

"Sandy Merton!" exclaimed Ned.

At this the other boys pressed forward to get a look at the lad who had acted so strangely of late. But Sandy did not give them a chance. He turned and fairly ran from the engine room.

"Well of all the odd places we come across that chap this is the queerest," spoke Ned. "What in the world can he be doing here?"

"Just what I was going to ask," Bart said. "It looks funny. We must ask Captain Needham."

"Ah, boys, getting warmed through?" asked a voice, and Captain Needham appeared a little

later. "Well, you look pretty comfortable. Guess you're ready for supper."

"You're a good guesser, sir," said Fenn with a laugh.

"Right this way then," the captain went on quickly, opening a small door which led from the engine room. "I'll have something sent in here. There's a table and some chairs. It's warm and you can dress in there when your clothes are dry."

The boys went into the apartment he indicated. It was lighted by a small hanging lamp. They sat down to the table, presenting a queer sight in the overalls and jumpers several sizes too large for them. In a little while a man came in with a big tray on which were plates of beef-stew, cups of coffee and plenty of bread and butter.

"Sort of a pick-up meal," Captain Needham said, as he looked in on them a little later, when they were in the midst of it. "Best we could do in a hurry. We don't often have people drop in on us out of a balloon for supper," and he laughed.

"Say, captain," began Ned. "Is that boy —"

"I'll be back in a little while," called the captain, as he closed the door, leaving the chums alone.

"I was going to ask him about Sandy," added Ned.

“It’ll keep,” remarked Bart.

The boys finished their meal and felt better.

“I’d like to get into my clothes,” remarked Fenn. “I want to see about sending a message home. We must be out of the dangerous part of the river now.”

“Open the door and we’ll go back to the engine room and see if they aren’t dry,” suggested Frank.

Bart, who was nearest, turned the knob. The door did not open.

“Stuck, I guess,” he said, and gave it a yank. It moved a bit, but only enough to show that it was fastened in some way.

“Locked!” exclaimed Ned. “They’ve locked us in!”

CHAPTER XXVI

PLANNING TO ESCAPE

“CAN’T be!” came from Bart. “What in the world would they do that for?”

“Don’t know,” admitted Ned. “But you can see for yourself. The door’s locked.”

“Maybe the catch slipped by mistake when the captain went out,” suggested Frank. “Give him a call, or pound on the wall to attract attention.”

“Let me give the door another try,” Bart said. “No use making a false alarm. Maybe it’s only stuck.”

But it was too evident that the portal was locked. The knob turned freely, but the bolt was shot and effectually made the boys prisoners.

“Shall I pound on the door?” asked Bart.

“Let’s see if there isn’t another way out,” suggested Ned.

They looked all around the room. It was about ten feet square, and, aside from the table, chairs and lamp contained no furniture or furnishings.

"There isn't even a window," said Frank.

"What's that up there?" inquired Fenn, pointing to some sort of an opening near the ceiling.

Bart climbed up on the table and investigated.

"It's a window," he said, "but it's not more than a foot square, and has bars to it. More for ventilation than anything else I guess. It's just above the waterline, for I can hear the river and the noise of the propeller."

"It must be a mistake," said Frank. "Go ahead, Bart, and make a racket like a base drum. We've got to get out of here, dress and get ashore somehow."

Thereupon Bart pounded with both fists on the door, while the boys aided him by yelling. They kept it up for several minutes but there was no response.

"Maybe the machinery makes so much noise they can't hear us," remarked Ned. "Let's all pound together. Use the chair and save our fists."

They raised a thundering din by knocking the chairs against the walls of the room and the door.

"Surely someone must hear that," said Bart, as he stopped to rest his arm. Evidently someone did, for in the silence that followed a voice asked:

“What do you want?”

“We want to get out,” called Bart. “We’re locked in.”

“Well boys, I’m very sorry,” went on the voice, which they recognized as that of Captain Needham’s “but I can’t let you out.”

“You can’t let us out?” demanded Ned. “What right have you got to keep us here, prisoners.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t think of calling you prisoners,” the captain said in a gentle tone from the other side of the door.

“What else is it?” Bart asked indignantly.

“Well, you’re only detained for a little while, that’s all. I can’t explain now, but it will be all right in a few days. I wish I could tell you, but I can’t. I’m bound to secrecy. If you will only be patient I’m sure it will be all right inside of a week.”

“Do you mean to say you’re going to keep us here a week?” inquired Fenn.

“Well, I’m afraid I’ll have to, you know. You’ll be well taken care of. Plenty to eat, but I’m sorry I can’t give you any better clothes than those you have on. You can’t run away in them, and you might if you had your own.”

“You’ll be sorry for this!” threatened Bart.

“When we do get out you’ll be arrested. You can’t do this sort of thing in this country!”

“But I have done it,” the captain replied, and the boys thought they heard him laughing. “Now don’t get excited. We’ll treat you well.”

“We don’t want to be treated well!” fired back Frank. “We want our rights! We demand that you release us at once!”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t do it, boys. The best I can do is to send word to your folks that you are safe, but unavoidably detained,” and this time the boys were sure the man was laughing.

“We’ll break this door down if you don’t let us out!” shouted Ned, and he banged a chair against the portal.

“I guess you’ll have your own troubles doing that,” the captain replied. “Go ahead and try. Now I’m going to treat you good. There’s another room opening off from the one where you are. It has bunks in it, a wash basin, running water and a few other conveniences. Just imagine you’re on a steamer, taking a trip for a few days, and it will soon be over.”

There was a clicking sound, and a part of the wall, the boys would never have taken for a door, slid back and showed a small room adjoining the one they were in. It had four bunks and a little

washroom, but there was no opening from it save the same kind of a ventilator that was in the first apartment.

"Breakfast will be served to you here in the morning," the captain called and then the boys could hear him going away.

For a little while the chums were too surprised at the sudden turn of affairs to be able to make any remarks. Then Bart exclaimed:

"Well, of all the high-handed, piratical proceedings this is the limit. It's just like a dime novel, or a five-cent library plot."

"Only not half so funny," spoke Ned. "The folks will be very much worried about us."

"Maybe the captain will keep his word and send them a message," ventured Bart.

"If he says we're unavoidably detained that will make them almost as much worried as if they didn't hear from us," added Frank. "Boys, we've got to get out of here."

"How?" asked Bart, with something like despair in his voice.

He might well ask how. Clad in garments which they could hardly venture out in, with no shoes, and without so much as a penknife to cut their way free, their case seemed hopeless. Their only weapons were the spoons which had been fur-

nished with their meal. There were no knives or forks.

"We've got to do it," Bart decided.

Silence fell upon them. They could feel the boat vibrate with the speed of the engine. They were still being carried up stream.

"What's it all about?" asked Fenn. "That's what gets me! I can't understand it!"

"I think I have a sort of clew," said Frank.

"What is it?"

"It hinges on the same thing that has been a mystery from the first."

"You mean the King of Paprica?" asked Ned.

"That's it. At first I thought those men were crazy. Now I begin to think differently."

"But what is their object, and why do they want to make prisoners of us? What have we done?"

"I think we have Sandy Merton to thank for our being locked up," went on Frank. "You see the captain arranged this after Sandy saw us and ran back to tell Mr. Needham. Sandy has been on our trail. You remember he was in the canoe. Then he was on guard there, near where those men had their hut. You can depend on it there's a deep mystery here, and, in some way, whether we know it or not, we're mixed up in it."

“Do you think these men on the boat are, also?”

“Of course. They’re acting for some one, and they don’t want us to get away to give an alarm. That’s as much as I can understand now. If any of you can get at the bottom of it say so.”

But no one could.

“It’s getting cold in here,” remarked Bart. “I’m going to crawl in the bunk. These overalls are rather thin.”

He got into one of the narrow beds and the others followed his example. The light from the lamp in the other room illuminated the apartment dimly. The boys talked the situation over from all sides coming to no conclusion.

“But what are we going to do?” asked Ned.

“Let’s wait until morning,” suggested Bart. “We’ll be rested then, and can think better. We’ll have a look around the place and maybe we can make a break.”

“Let’s make a break when they open the door to give us breakfast,” suggested Ned.

“That might be a good plan,” came from Bart. “The morning will do. We can’t accomplish anything to-night, so there’s no use fretting.”

In spite of their unpleasant position the boys finally fell asleep and slumbered soundly. Bart

was the first to awaken and he hardly knew where he was. A glance around soon brought to his mind what had happened. He hurried into the other room. As he reached it he gave a cry that brought his companions in on the run.

"What is it?" asked Ned.

Bart pointed to the table. The dishes had all been removed while they slept and the lamp was gone. A dim light came in through the ventilators.

"They were here in the night!" cried Bart.

"What's queer about that?" asked Frank.

"This," spoke Bart. "They didn't come in through the door, as the chairs are in front of it just as we left them, and the door opens inwardly."

"Well?" asked Fenn.

"They didn't come in through the window, for there isn't any."

"How did they get in then?" asked Fenn.

"There must be some secret way that we don't know about. We must find it. That's how we can escape."

"Perhaps it's around the ventilators," suggested Frank.

"We'll take a look," spoke Bart.

They soon found that the one in the bunk room

would not admit the body of a child, to say nothing to that of a man. The one in the room where they had eaten was similar. As Bart, standing on the table, was examining it closely, he motioned to his companions to make no noise.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE ESCAPE

“WHAT is it?” asked Ned in a whisper.

“Some men are talking up on deck. I can hear them,” Bart answered in a low voice.

He listened intently for a moment and came down from the table.

“I don’t know who they are,” he said. “I didn’t recognize Captain Needham’s voice, but one man was saying: ‘It was a great idea, him calling himself the King of Paprica. That must have thrown ’em all off the scent.’”

“What do you make of it?” asked Frank.

“It only confirms what we guessed at, that the men on this boat are, in some way, connected with the mystery.”

“See any way of getting out around that ventilator?” asked Fenn.

“No,” replied Bart. “We’ve got to try the floor or walls. Say!” he went on in an excited tone. “Why didn’t I think of it before. The

way that door slid back ought to have given me the tip. There must be some secret passage in the walls or floor. Let's look for it!"

Excited over the prospect of escape, the boys carefully examined the walls. They seemed solid, except where the door slid back to reveal the bunk room. This was operated from outside, they decided. There was no way of escape open there.

"Look at every inch of the floor!" said Bart, dropping to his knees.

The others followed his example. They crawled about with their eyes close to the boards. Suddenly Frank uttered an exclamation.

"Find anything?" called Bart, who was in the bunk room.

For answer Frank pointed to a long, straight crack in the floor, under the table. It was about a quarter of an inch wide, and was at right angles to the other cracks which appeared wherever the boards joined.

"I'll bet that's a sliding trap-door!" exclaimed Frank. "We must try to open it."

At that moment a knock sounded on the door and a voice called out:

"If you boys will promise to behave and not cut up rough I'll bring in some breakfast."

"We'll promise," agreed Bart, his voice trem-

bling slightly. "We'll take the food," he added in a whisper to his companions, "and then we'll try to escape to-night. Don't say anything to whoever comes in."

The person outside proved to be a husky man with a big tray of food. Standing behind him in the passage were two other men, so there would have been little use in the boys making a dash for liberty. In silence the food was placed on the table, and without speaking the man withdrew, locking the door after him.

The boys waited until the footsteps died away. They were so excited over the prospect of escape they did not think of the food. Eagerly they looked for a knife. There were only spoons. Ned uttered an exclamation of disappointment, but Bart seized one of them.

"The handle will go into the crack," he said. "Maybe we can shove the door back."

He tried, but was unable to budge the slide, if it was one.

"Let's all try," suggested Frank.

There were four large spoons. The chums moved the table so they could kneel side by side and inserted the handles into the narrow crack.

"All together!" called Bart.

The piece of flooring suddenly slid back, reveal-

ing a flight of steps leading downward into the hold of the boat.

“Hurrah!” cried Ned. “Now we’ll show Captain Needham a trick or two!”

“We must wait until night!” said Bart. “It will be easier then. Besides, we’ll need a lantern in that dark hole, and they’ll bring one with our suppers. Now I can eat with a good appetite.”

“How can we escape in these clothes?” asked Fenn, looking at his overalls and jumper.

“I’m not so afraid as you are of meeting the girls,” spoke Bart. “Let’s eat now. I wish it was night!”

The chums thought they had never known such a long day. At noon their dinner was served, the same precaution being observed as with the breakfast. With supper the man brought a lantern which he hung up on a hook in the ceiling. Then he went out, closing the door and locking it. All the while the barge had been steaming ahead.

“Wonder why they used that trap door to take the things away by last night?” asked Ned.

“Probably to impress us with the mystery of the thing,” answered Bart. “Lucky they didn’t close it tight or we’d never noticed where it was.”

They ate their supper and waited in anxiety until it would be late enough to make the attempt to

escape. They wanted to delay until all but the watchmen would be asleep. At last Bart said he thought it must be close to midnight. The lantern was taken down, and, using the spoons, they slid back the trap door.

"I'll go first with the lantern," said Bart. "The rest of you follow. Don't make a bit of noise. We must make our way to the deck, somehow, and, as soon as you do, rush for the side and overboard. We can easily swim ashore. No matter what kind it is, it's better than being held here prisoners."

"What about our clothes?" asked Fenn.

"If you want to ask for 'em, go ahead," said Bart. "I wouldn't stop for a full dress suit now. These togs are good enough for me."

Cautiously Bart began to descend the steps. The lantern showed a black hold, filled with boxes and barrels. The others followed, stepping gingerly, for they were in their bare feet.

Bart looked about for some means of reaching the deck. Ahead he saw a glimmer of light. Placing the lantern where it would show him the way back he went closer. He found the light was at the head of a companionway which he ascended and noticed it led to the after part of the barge. He could feel the cool wind blowing on his face.

"We'll chance it," he said, and he went back to tell his chums.

They made their way up the stairs, pausing to listen. There was no sound save the throbbing of the engine and the churn of the screw.

"I see the stars," whispered Ned. "This must lead to the deck."

It did, and two minutes more and they stood at the side of the barge, ready to leap overboard. They could see the shore not far away.

"Come on!" said Bart in a low tone.

At that instant a voice called:

"Hi there! Come back! Captain, the boys are escaping!"

The sound of feet running across the deck toward them could be heard. Then, in the light of a lantern, a man was seen approaching where the chums stood.

"Overboard!" yelled Bart.

There were four splashes in the water, and the four boys were striking out for shore.

"Stop the barge!" This was Captain Needham's voice calling. "Lower a boat! We mustn't let 'em get away! After 'em men!"

There was a ringing of bells. The water churned under the stern of the *Comet* as the engine was reversed. Then came the sound of a boat

being lowered. A few seconds later it struck the water.

“We’re almost to shore,” called Bart cautiously.
“Keep on boys!”

Then came the noise of oars in the rowlocks. The barge had come to a stop.

“Give way!” called Captain Needham. “Get ’em before they land or we’ll have trouble. But I guess they can’t go very far barefooted.”

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE PURSUIT

NED, being the best swimmer, was first ashore. The others soon joined him. They could dimly make out the approaching boat in which were several men.

“Which way?” asked Fenn.

“No way at all,” replied Bart. “To the trees! If we take a step they’ll hear us, and besides, we don’t know any more than the man in the moon which way to go. Hide in a tree until they give up the chase.”

The shore was lined with trees. It wasn’t much fun climbing up barefooted, and with thin clothes on, but the boys managed it, and soon were in a big willow, the thick leaves of which afforded a good screen.

They had no sooner perched themselves on limbs, well hidden by the foliage, than the sound of the boat’s keel grating on the gravelly shore was heard. Then came the captain’s voice.

“Scatter now and hunt for 'em. They can't have gone far! We were after 'em too quick! But be careful men, I don't want those boys hurt. Be easy, remember!”

“That's queer,” thought Ned. “In fact this whole business is queer.”

The noise the men made as they crashed through the underbrush came plainly to the ears of the boys. They could see the gleam of lanterns the searchers carried, as they ran to and fro. But the tree proved a happy thought. None of the men imagined the boys were in it, and some of the pursuers even stood beneath the willow and voiced their remarks of disappointment.

For ten or fifteen minutes the search was kept up in the vicinity of where the boat had landed. The men made a circle about the place looking for the boys but did not find them. The chums, cramped from clinging to the branches, dared not move for fear of rustling the leaves, and disclosing their presence. Finally the searchers gathered about the boat, close to the tree.

“Guess they gave us the slip,” remarked the captain. “Smart lads those. Well, men, might as well go back. Get the boat ready.” The men moved off, Captain Needham remaining beneath the tree a moment longer. The boys heard him

murmur: "The King of Paprica will not like this. I must get word to him at once."

Then he moved away. A little later the sound of the boat being hoisted to the barge could be heard.

"Can't we get down now?" whispered Fenn. "I'm all stiff and cold."

"Better wait awhile," advised Bart. "They may have left some one on watch."

It was weary waiting but the boys did not complain. It was so still they could hear the men in the small boat boarding the barge. Then there came the sound of the big craft getting underway. Bart peered out through the leaves. He could just make out the steamer.

"They've turned around! They're heading down stream!" he said in an excited whisper. "I guess we're safe now. Come on, boys!"

He scrambled down, followed by the others.

From the shore they could see the lights of the barge disappearing around a bend in the river.

"Must be something very queer in this, when our escape makes them turn around and go back," spoke Bart.

"Looks as if we were surely mixed up in that mystery," came from Frank. "Wish we knew how."

“We ’ll soon know,” replied Bart. “This thing will have to end in a little while. Now, the question is, what are we going to do?”

“Let’s look for a place to stay the rest of the night,” counseled Frank.

“All right, only I don’t feel much like tramping through the woods and fields in the dark and barefooted,” objected Fenn. “Why not stay here until it’s light enough to see where we are going?”

After talking it over they decided this was the best plan. It was too risky tramping about in an unknown locality, especially without some protection for their feet. Bart walked back away from the river. Then he called to his chums:

“Here’s a hay field, fellows. It’s been cut but hasn’t been cocked up yet. Come on, we’ll make a pile of it and crawl in to get warm.”

It was a good suggestion. The half-cured grass made a warm nest for the thinly clad boys, and they huddled down together in a big mound of the fragrant hay, pulling it over themselves until they were hidden from sight, leaving only a little hole to breathe through. It was so warm and comfortable that they speedily fell asleep.

The sun was shining when they awakened.

Bart sprang up, scattering the hay all about, and his companions followed.

“ Oh, for a bit of breakfast! ” Fenn remarked.

“ ‘ So say we all of us, ’ ” chanted Bart.

“ There’s a chance of it! ” exclaimed Ned.

“ What? ”

“ Breakfast! ” and he pointed to a little village about half a mile away.

“ Hurrah! We’re in luck! ” cried Ned.

“ Now for a meal and a chance to send word home! ”

“ We can’t go looking this way! ” exclaimed Fenn. “ Look at our clothes! ”

“ You mean don’t look at ’em, ” corrected Bart.

“ We’ll hang a sign out; ‘ We have better ones at home. ’ That will satisfy any one. As for me I’d go there and ask for a bite if I only had my swimming togs on, and these are a heap-sight more respectable than those. Here goes! ”

He strode forward, pulling wisps of hay from his hair. The others followed. From the field they emerged into a country road that led to the village. They were almost at the outskirts of the hamlet, where several houses were grouped together when a boy came from one out into the highway, carrying a pail of milk.

“ That looks good! ” exclaimed Bart. “ Hi,

kid," he called, "sell us a drink of milk, will you?"

The boy halted. He gazed at the four strange figures approaching; figures clad in ragged overalls and jumpers; bare-footed figures, with bits of hay clinging to them. Then the boy dropped his pail of milk spilling it all over and with a yell of: "Pop! Pop! Here they be!" he dashed back into the house.

The next moment three men came from the house. They carried clubs in their hands, and one had a gun.

"Here they are!" called one, as the three advanced on the run toward the boys.

"Polite way to receive guests," commented Bart.

As he spoke there came hurrying from houses adjoining that where the boy lived who gave the alarm, a number of men and youths. All of them had clubs or some sort of weapon.

"They seem to be after us!" cried Fenn.

"So they are!" admitted Bart. "I'll bet Captain Needham lied about us and put them on our track. He probably sent some message last night."

"We'd better run," counseled Frank, and at that the boys took to their heels.

The pursuit was on in earnest. The crowd behind kept increasing as men and youths from houses further back on the road joined it.

“Catch 'em! Stop 'em! Head 'em off!” were the cries that reached the boys. But they kept on at their best speed. They had the advantage of a good start, and were not hampered with heavy clothing and shoes. The road was deep in dust and was not hard on their unprotected feet.

“They'll never catch us!” exclaimed Bart. “But what in the world do they want with us?”

“Don't talk! Run!” came from Fenn.

It began to look as though the boys would get away. The road stretched invitingly before them, and, though the number of their pursuers was increasing they had not cut down the lads' lead much. But fortune does not always favor the brave. As the chums went around a curve they saw in front of them a load of hay, overturned on the highway. It blocked the whole width of the road, save for a strip of sward on either side.

“Go around it!” cried Ned.

But when they came up they found the passage on both sides was so thick with big Canadian thistles, as to daunt even the bravest barefooted person, particularly if he had not been used to going without his shoes. They gingerly tried the

passage on either side but had to turn back. The pursuers gave a shout and came on faster than before.

“Over the hay!” sung out Ned.

He made a running jump to scramble up the small hill of dried grass. The others followed. From the other side there suddenly appeared the farmer who owned it. He had been trying to fix his wagon. He saw the boys attempting to climb over the load, and noted the crowd in pursuit.

“No, you don’t!” he yelled, making a grab for Fenn and Bart, who were in the rear. He seized them by their loose clothing. As the two boys felt themselves being pulled back they instinctively grabbed at Ned and Frank. All four fell in a heap on the highway at the bottom of the hay pile. An instant later the crowd was upon them and the boys were grabbed by half a dozen hands.

“We’ve got ’em!” exclaimed one gray-bearded man, with a big tin star on his coat. “We’ll git th’ reward. Great luck!”

“What right have you got to chase us?” demanded Bart.

“Best right in the world,” replied the constable.

“What have we done?” asked Frank.

“Broke jail, that’s what ye done.”

“Broke jail! We never were in jail!”

“What? Ain’t ye th’ two men who escaped from Blissville jail last night?” demanded the constable.

“No!” fairly shouted Bart. “Can’t you count? There are four of us and mere boys, not men. The only place we broke from was the hold of the barge where they were keeping us prisoners, after we fell from the balloon!”

“Balloon!” exclaimed another man, coming forward from the crowd. “Are you th’ boys from Darewell th’ alarm has been sent out for? Went up in a balloon that broke away?”

“That’s who we are,” replied Fenn.

“By Heck! men, we’ve got th’ wrong ones!” cried the man who had last spoken. “These are the balloon boys! It was two men, not four boys, who broke jail! We’ve made a mistake!”

“What made ye run, if ye wasn’t guilty?” demanded the constable, rather incensed over his disappointment.

“Guess you’d run, Amos,” put in the other man, “if ye saw this crowd after ye.”

CHAPTER XXIX

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

IT took considerable explanation to set things straight but it was finally accomplished. The boys told as much of their story as they thought proper, from the time they went up in the balloon until they saw the crowd after them.

In turn they were informed that during the night two prisoners had escaped from the jail at Blissville, the next town to Pentkirk, which was the village they were then in.

"Lucky you mentioned balloon," spoke Mr. Weldon, the farmer who had come to the chum's aid.

"Did you hear of it?" asked Ned.

"Well, I guess! Circulars describin' ye have been sent to every postoffice around here."

"Then Captain Needham hasn't telephoned word to our folks!" cried Bart. "We must do it at once. Is there a wire in town?" he asked.

"Yep, an' ye can use it all ye want to," said

Mr. Weldon. "There's a hundred dollars reward for news of each of ye, an' maybe ye wouldn't mind lettin' some of th' boys earn it by telephonin' t' th' Darewell police?"

"Of course not," replied Bart, "so long as our folks are told, at once, that's all we care."

"We'd like some breakfast and — and — some decent clothes too," put in Fenn.

"We'll see to that," replied Mr. Weldon. "Come along with me."

He took the boys to his house, first sending a messenger to telephone to Darewell that the boys were safe and would shortly be home. The chums were soon eating a hearty meal, and then were fitted out in garments, which, if they did not fit them well, being collected from several houses that contained lads about of their age, were a welcome relief from the overalls and jumpers.

"I never knew how much depended on shoes before," said Fenn, as he gazed at those loaned him.

"I can feel those thistles yet," observed Frank.

"Now I s'pose you boys'll want t' git home," observed Mr. Weldon when breakfast was finished. "I'll be glad t' advance ye th' money for your tickets."

"We'll be much obliged if you will," spoke

Bart. "If you want references you can telephone to any one in Darewell."

"Them circulars is reference enough," was the answer, as he waved one containing a description of the boys. Their relatives had sent them broadcast after the balloon had broken loose and no word had been received from the chums by the following morning.

It was not long before the four were on a train, speeding home. They were so full of talk over their recent experiences that it was hard to say where one began and the other left off.

"One thing we've got to do the minute we get back," said Bart.

"What?" asked Fenn.

"We've got to make a trip to that place where we saw the men acting so queerly, where Sandy was on guard, and where that log cabin was, and see what it all means. We'll have those men arrested."

"And Captain Needham, too."

"Yes, he's in the plot."

The boys arrived home about noon. That they were welcomed by their parents, relatives and friends is putting it mildly. There was a big crowd at the depot, as the train got in, and there was a regular procession up the main street, with

the boys in the center. Such shouting, laughing and cheering was seldom heard in Darewell before, and the next issue of the town paper was hardly large enough to give even a partial account of what happened.

As soon as the boys were released by their friends, which took considerable time, there was a consultation at Mr. Wilding's house.

It was attended by the four boys, Frank's uncle, Mr. Keene and Mr. Masterson. The lads told their story from the start, beginning with their first encounter with the King of Paprica.

"There are just two ways about it," said Mr. Wilding. "Those men are either crazy or they are criminals, up to some game. In either case they ought to be driven from the community."

The others agreed with him. Then they discussed a plan. It was decided that the boys, accompanied by Mr. Wilding, the chief of police and an officer, should go to the clearing at the foot of Bender's hill, and see if any of the men were still there. If they were they were to be arrested, and held until they made a satisfactory explanation.

The little posse started about three o'clock that afternoon, the matter being kept quiet. The two police officers were armed. The boys wanted to

take their rifles, but were not allowed to, as their parents did not want them to run any chances.

The chief of police and his officer led the way through the woods and across the fields to the location described by the boys. They went cautiously, keeping a lookout for any signs of the strangely-acting men.

As they advanced through a little glade, close to where the clearing was located, the chief, who was in advance, called out:

“There’s some one sitting on the ground just ahead.”

Bart pressed forward. He saw a lad leaning against a big stake driven into the earth.

“Why it’s Jimmie Nelson!” Bart exclaimed.

“The laziest boy in town,” murmured the chief.

“I’ll go up and speak to him,” Bart went on. “You can hang back here until I see what he’s doing.”

“Doing? He never does anything,” said Fenn.

“Hello, Jimmie,” called Bart, as he started to cross the clearing. “What you doing here?”

“Got a job.”

“You call that a job; sitting there?”

"Sure, it's a nice easy job. Sandy got it for me. He's working for the same firm."

Bart gave a sudden start. The plot, it seemed, was thickening.

"What are your duties?" Bart went on.

"Oh I just sit here to watch that this stake don't move, and if I see any one coming I'm to pull this string."

"Have you pulled it?"

"Not yet, ain't seen any one."

"What do you call me?"

"That's so. I almost forgot. Say, pull it, will you; you're nearer to it than I am."

The string was about two inches from Jim's hand, and within one inch of Bart's foot.

"What happens if I pull it?"

"Don't know. That ain't part of my job," and Jim blinked his eyes lazily.

"Then I guess I'll not pull it," replied Bart, putting his foot on the cord to prevent Jim from doing it.

"All right, maybe I'll lose my job now, but I don't care. There's too much work. Have to stay awake too much."

Bart turned and beckoned to his companions who had remained in the woods. They came on in a hurry.

“You’re not supposed to come here,” Jim objected in a lazy tone. “I ought to pull that string. Pull it, Bart, you’re closer than I am.”

“Forward!” exclaimed the chief. “We’ll see where this cord leads!”

He started to trace the white string that stretched along the ground and into the woods beyond the clearing. The boys followed, and the party broke into a run. Bart carried the end of the cord with him to prevent Jim from pulling it, but he need not have taken the trouble as Jim had gone to sleep.

Just as the posse was at the further edge of the clearing there emerged from the woods four men. One was the white-bearded individual, whose strange language and actions had first aroused the boys’ suspicions, one the tramp, whom the chums had encountered three times; the third was the man who had taken Sandy’s gun that day, while at the sight of the fourth Frank exclaimed:

“The King of Paprica!”

The men stopped abruptly on seeing the boys and their companions. There was a moment’s silence and then a noise sounded off to the left. They all turned to behold Captain Needham approaching on the run.

“The boys got away!” he cried, addressing the King of Paprica.

CHAPTER XXX

STRIKING OIL — CONCLUSION

“YOU'RE right! They did!” exclaimed the chief of police. “They got away from you, and they're here now to prefer charges against you and the other scoundrels. I place you all under arrest,” and he drew his revolver, the officer doing likewise.

“There's no necessity for that,” said the man who had called himself the King of Paprica. “We're not going to make any trouble.”

“You'd better not,” said the chief significantly.

“I can explain it all now,” the man went on.

“About kidnaping these boys?” demanded Mr. Wilding.

“I didn't kidnap 'em,” spoke Captain Needham, “they came aboard and were glad enough to. I had to hold 'em a while, and sorry enough I was to do it.”

“You'll be sorrier before we're through with you,” remarked the chief.

“Gentlemen, perhaps I had better explain,” said

the man whom the boys had seen wearing the gilt crown.

"We'll give you a chance," said Mr. Wilding.

"In the first place we owe you boys an apology," the man went on. "We'll make it a substantial one too, as you will see, but first let me introduce myself. My name is Patrick Ricka, and I am interested in oil wells."

"Oil wells!" exclaimed Mr. Wilding. "There aren't any around here."

"There wasn't but there will be very soon," Mr. Ricka added. "My companions are William Hendershot," and he indicated the man with the white beard, "Joseph Gampfer," who was the tramp, "and Andrew Maddox. They are associated with me in this enterprise. Captain Needham, I believe, you boys know," and he smiled.

"Are you crazy or is it a joke about the King of Paprica?" asked Mr. Wilding, not inclined to let up on the men.

"It was an odd title, made up partly from my own name, as you will observe, and adopted to meet the exigencies of the occasion. For some time I have suspected there was oil in this region," Patrick Ricka continued. "I knew if I made any tests openly some one would find out

what I was after, and I would have no opportunity of securing the land without paying a fabulous price for it. So I decided to come here with my assistants and work in secret.

“ We thought the best plan would be to pretend one or more of us was slightly insane and that the other was his keeper. This was done. I had the hut (a portable one) built and placed the name above the door to further the idea that we were insane. Then we went through some rather foolish antics, just to keep persons from prying around here. You boys were the more persistent, and saw more of us than any one else. That day Mr. Hendershot was poking his pole down in the river he was testing to see if there was a strata of oil land under the water. You boys thought he was crazy. Again, when you started to cross here and Sandy ordered you away, we were making some microscopic tests of the upper surface, and did not want to be disturbed. We hired Sandy, not because we liked him, but because we heard he was on the ‘outs’ with you boys, and we knew he would not make friends with you and so unintentionally perhaps, give our secret away.

“ As it happened the plan was successful in a measure. Then Mr. Gampfer in the guise of

a tramp met you and inquired where the cabin was, for he had, up to that time, not been to it. He saw you were rather dangerous boys to have loose, as far as our plans were concerned. Even moving the cabin did not fool you. We saw you with the telescope that day," and Mr. Ricka laughed.

"What did Sandy and Mr. Gampfer follow us for?" demanded Bart.

"Only to see if they could overhear what you were talking about, and learn whether you were still determined to solve our secret," replied the oil man. "They intended no harm, and, I trust, worked none. If they had heard you discussing ways of finding out our secret they would have warned me to hasten matters to a close. I hope they did not annoy you."

"It worried us," Bart replied.

"Of course. We are sorry for that. In the meanwhile we went on with our experiments. We found indications that oil was plentiful under here and made arrangements to buy the property. But we paid a good price for it, and each seller will have a share in the profits. We did nothing dishonest. Mr. Gampfer gave you a tip, once, but you didn't seem to grasp it."

"What was it?" asked Fenn.

“The day you borrowed the salt,” replied the man who had posed as a tramp. “You see I was engaged in going through the country around here with my instruments looking for indications of oil. You asked me what my work was and I said hunting the ‘Oilander Tincander.’ If you will say that slowly you’ll see what I mean.”

“Oil-ander Tin-can-der,” murmured Bart. “Oh! I see. Oil-can!”

“Exactly.”

“Well,” resumed Mr. Ricka, “everything went along well until that balloon trip. That brought about the climax. Of course it was all an accident, and we had no idea our barge would pick you boys from the river. You see we have a barge to bring machinery to us. It had delivered some and was to bring more. It was on the way after it when the balloon fell. Sandy Merton, whom we kept in our employ, was aboard and recognized you boys. He told Captain Needham, who, knowing how nearly you had discovered our secret, determined to hold you a while until he could let me know. He had no right to, of course, and we will pay you any reasonable damages.

“For you see we have struck oil,” Mr. Ricka went on. “Our property which extends for over

a mile all around Bender's hill, is rich in oil. As soon as you boys escaped Captain Needham turned about and came back. I apprehend that is correct, Captain, for, though he sent a telegram to me telling of your — er — of your detention — I have not seen him from shortly before the balloon fell, until this moment."

Captain Needham nodded in assent.

"The need of secrecy is at an end," Mr. Ricka continued. "Our rights are all secured and we don't care how soon everyone in Darewell knows about the oil."

"What was Jimmie Nelson doing out there?" asked Bart.

"He's a friend of Sandy's," replied the oil man. "We hired him to stay out there and pull the string, which rings a bell in the cabin, as soon as he saw any one. We knew he was lazy, and this was the easiest and safest job we could think of for him."

"He's asleep now," said Fenn.

"I suppose so. Well, there's no need for him any longer. I guess we'll discharge him. Now as to you boys. I realize we had no right to detain you, and you doubtless suffered some hardships. Will a thousand dollars' worth of valuable oil stock apiece satisfy you?"

“Is the stock any good?” asked Bart quickly.

“I think Mr. Wilding can answer that,” and Mr. Ricka showed the bank cashier some certificates.

“That’s as good as gold,” replied Mr. Wilding.

“Will you boys accept it?” asked the oil man. “It isn’t stock in these new wells, but in some long established ones.”

The boys and Mr. Wilding consulted together for a moment. The boys were only too willing to call the matter square on that basis, and the cashier gave his consent to the deal, as regarded his own son, after demanding that Mr. Ricka also pay the reward, which was done. The other chums were sure their relatives would not object.

“Now that is settled, come and see the first well we have sunk,” suggested Mr. Ricka. “It is not finished, but we know it is going to be a success, for we have tested it.”

He led the way to a little clearing beyond the big one. In front of the cabin was some curious machinery. There were a number of tanks and barrels, which smelled strongly of oil.

“Did you connect the dynamo?” asked Mr. Ricka of Captain Needham.

“Yes, just before I left the barge.”

“You see we get our power from a dynamo on the barge,” the oil man explained. “A wire runs from here to the boat, through the woods. We didn’t dare risk taking power from town or some one would find out what we were up to. The barge not only brought us our supplies but gave us electricity for an experimental plant. We’ll soon have a larger one.”

Then he showed the visitors where a small well had been bored by means of new and improved electrical machinery. It gave a good quality of oil, and there were indications that the under strata was permeated with the valuable fluid.

In fact the new oil company proved a big success, and several land owners in the vicinity made small fortunes. Frank’s uncle was one of the lucky ones, though his share was not as large as was some of his neighbors’.

The boys’ relatives decided to let the matter drop, in consideration of the settlement made by Mr. Ricka. Soon there was a big boom in town, caused by the knowledge that oil had been struck. A number of persons found employment with the company, Sandy Merton being one of them. Jim Nelson might have been hired, but he was too lazy to ask for a job.

“Letter for you, Ned,” said his chums one day about a week later, as they were all in the postoffice, for Bart had glanced in the Wilding box.

“Wonder who it’s from?” spoke Ned.

“Best way to find out is to open it,” suggested Fenn.

It was a short epistle, and Ned had soon finished reading it.

“It’s from my uncle and aunt in New York,” he said. “They want me to pay them a long visit next vacation, and I can bring some friends with me. Will you fellows go?”

“To New York? Well I guess yes!” exclaimed Bart, and the others nodded in assent.

“We can have corking times!” Ned went on. “I’ve never been there. It’s great, according to what you read about it.”

“We couldn’t have much more excitement than we did right here the last few weeks,” remarked Fenn.

But whether the boys did or not can be learned in the second volume of this series, which will be entitled: “The Darewell Chums in the City; or, The Disappearance of Ned Wilding.”

“I wish it was time to go now,” Ned went on as he put the letter in his pocket.

“Have to wait, that’s all,” said Bart. “By the way, what ever became of John Newton, who used to work here as a messenger?”

“Didn’t you hear?” asked Fenn.

“No. Did he get to be assistant postmaster?”

“Went to New York last week,” Fenn added, for John lived near him. “Said he was going to be an actor or get some sort of a job on the stage. Wouldn’t wonder but what he went in some variety show. He could imitate birds better than any one I ever heard.”

“Maybe we’ll see him when we go to New York,” suggested Bart.

There, as they discussed the possibilities of their trip, which was destined to be much more surprising than any of them supposed, we will take leave of them.

THE END.

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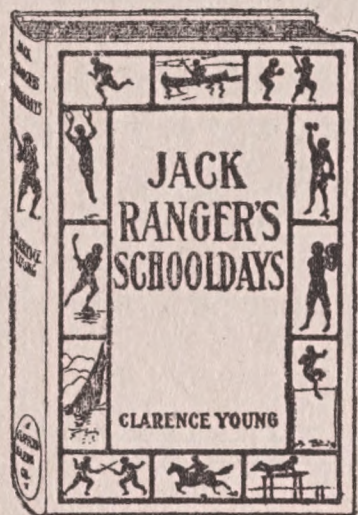
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